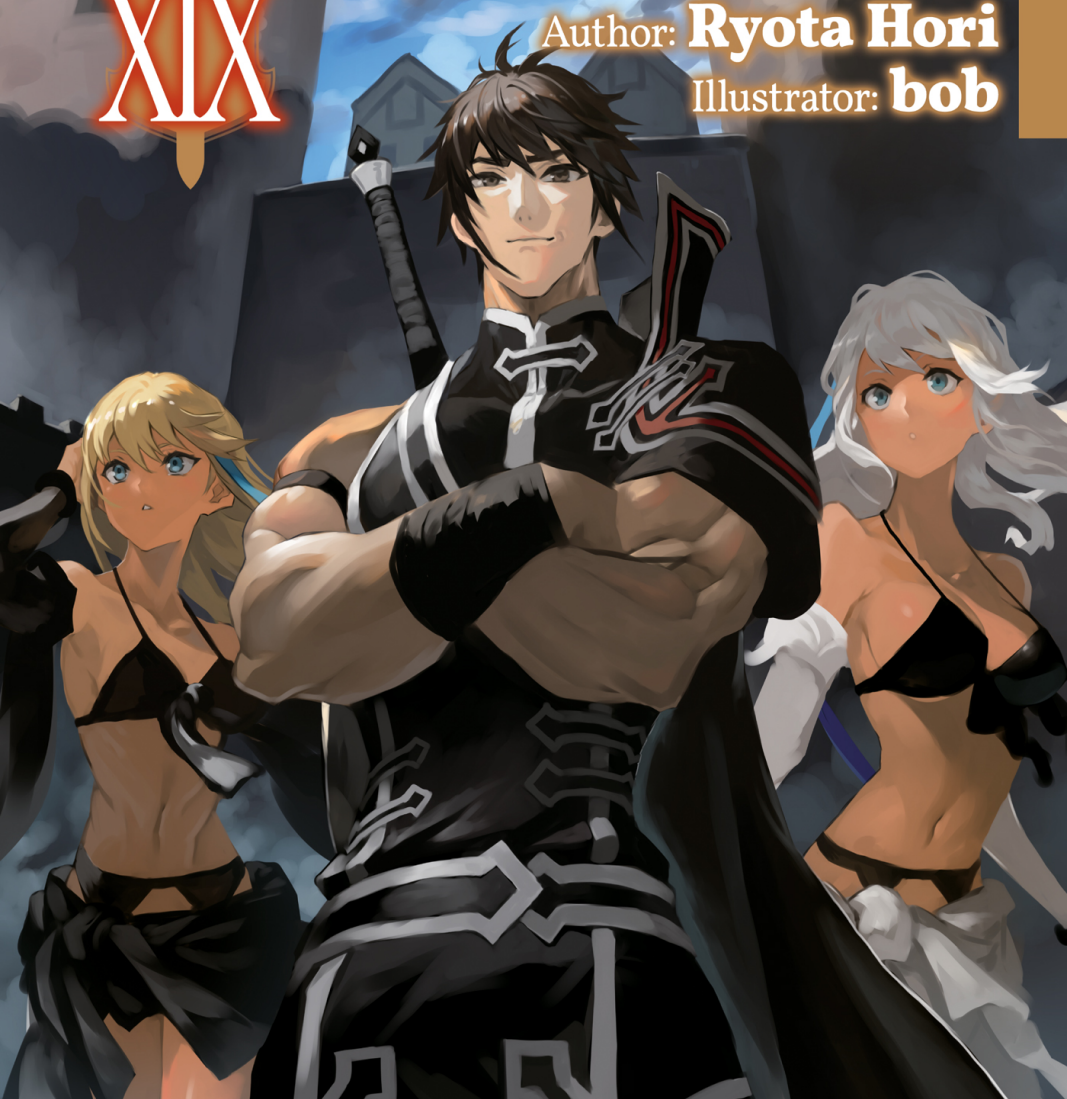


RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

XIX

Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**





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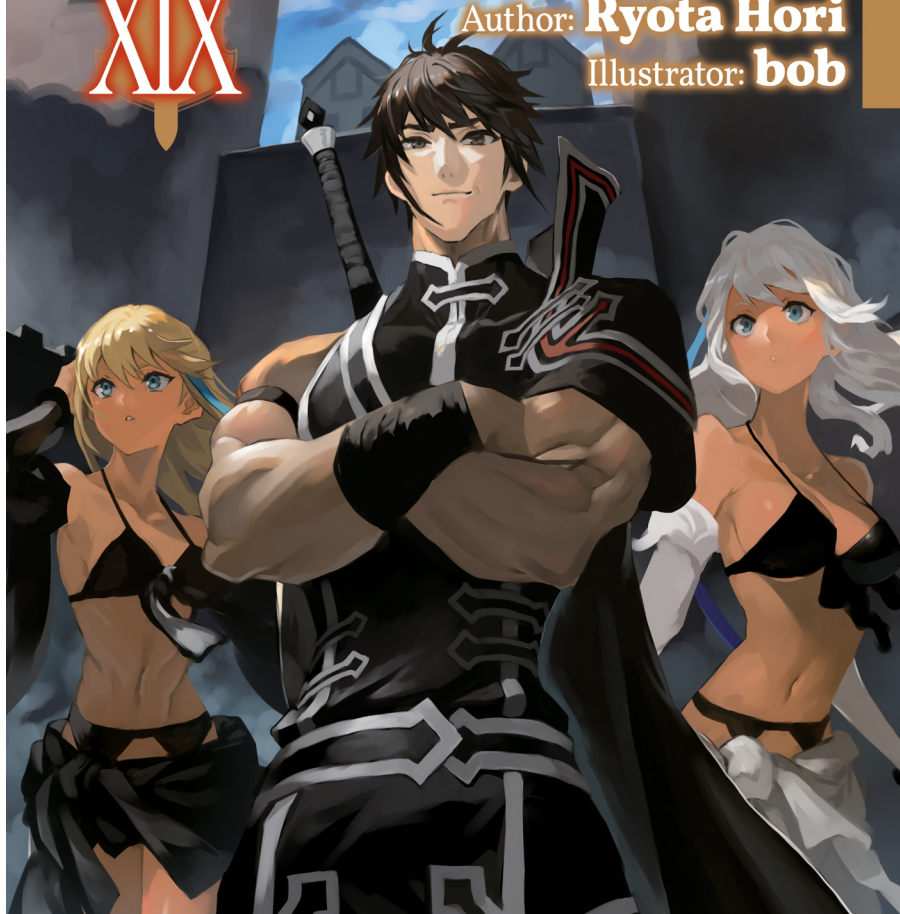


RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR

XIV

Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**



**“This is
feverish...
Suffocating,
even...”**

**Rows of soldiers
and cavaliers filled
the highway—the
one leading from
Pireas to northern
Rhoadseria—that
crossed the Cannat
Plains.**

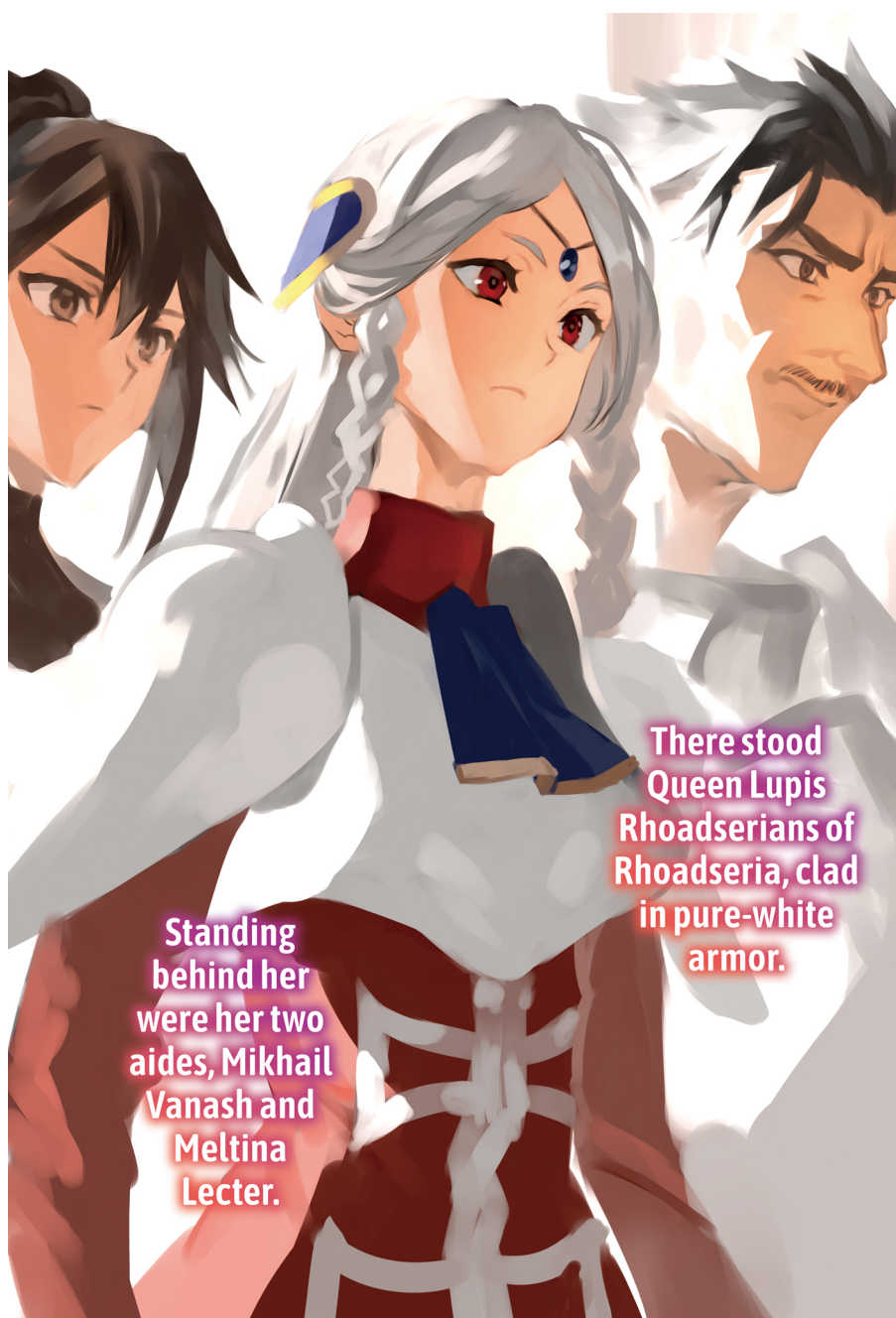
RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR





"Do I? I'll have
you know I'm
pretty nervous
right now."

"You seem quite
composed..."



There stood
Queen Lupis
Rhoadserians of
Rhoadseria, clad
in pure-white
armor.

Standing
behind her
were her two
aides, Mikhail
Vanash and
Meltina
Lecter.

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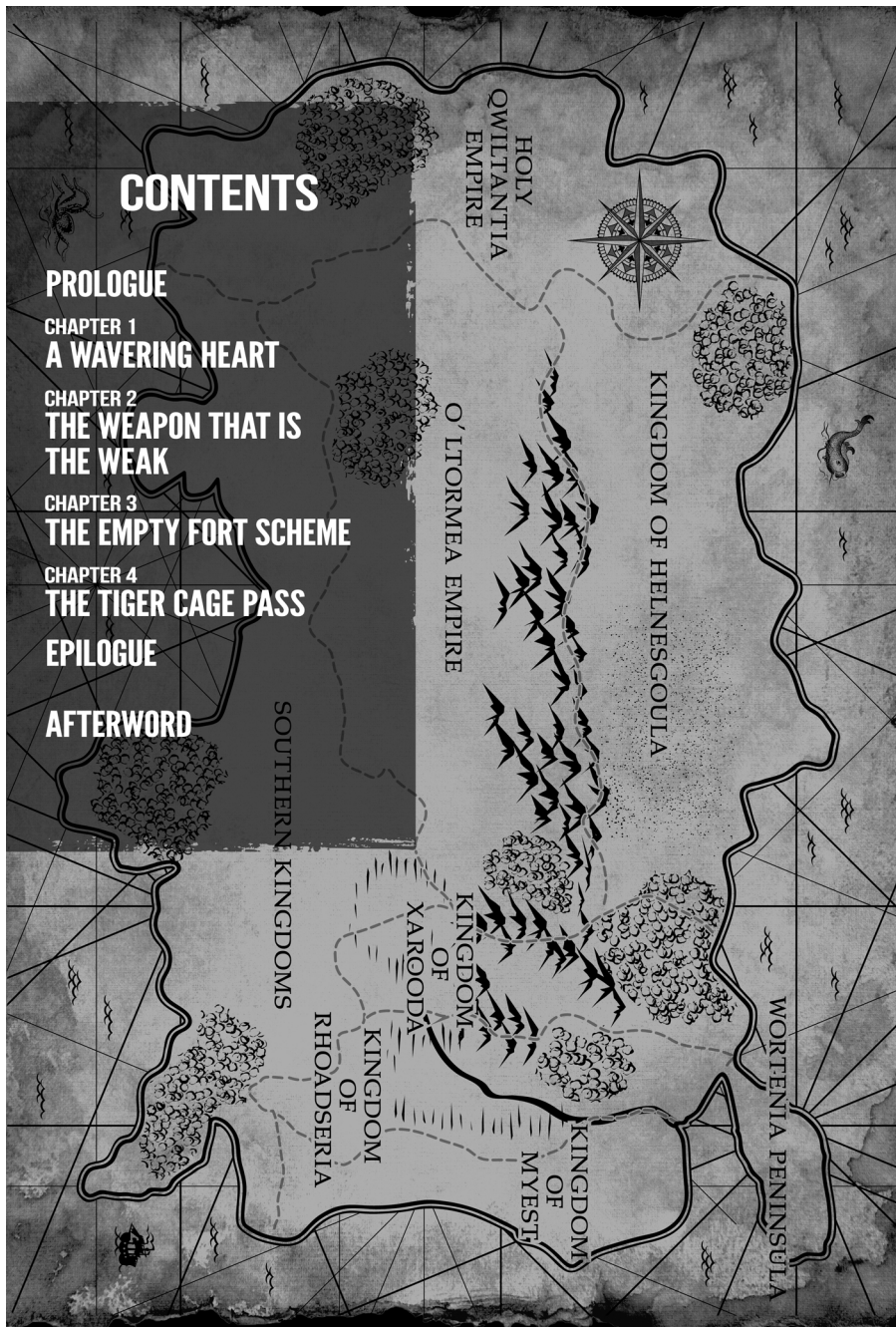
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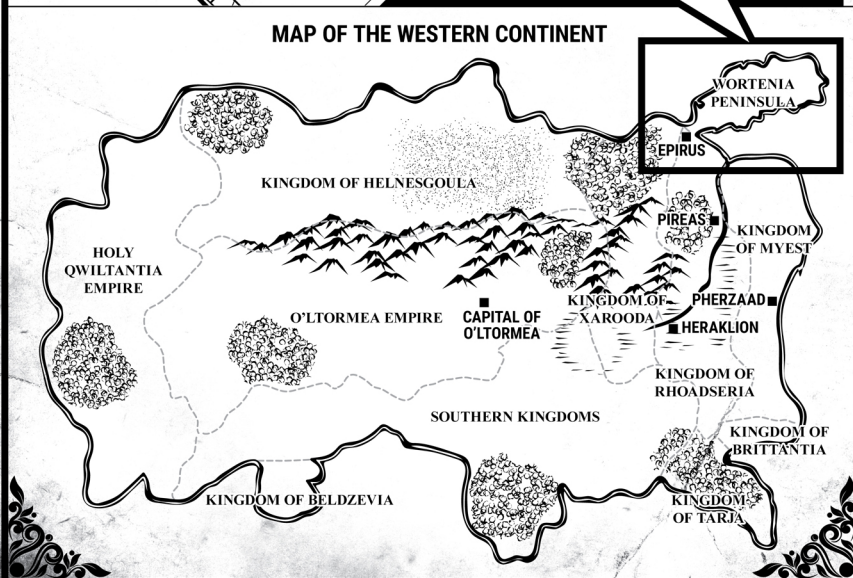
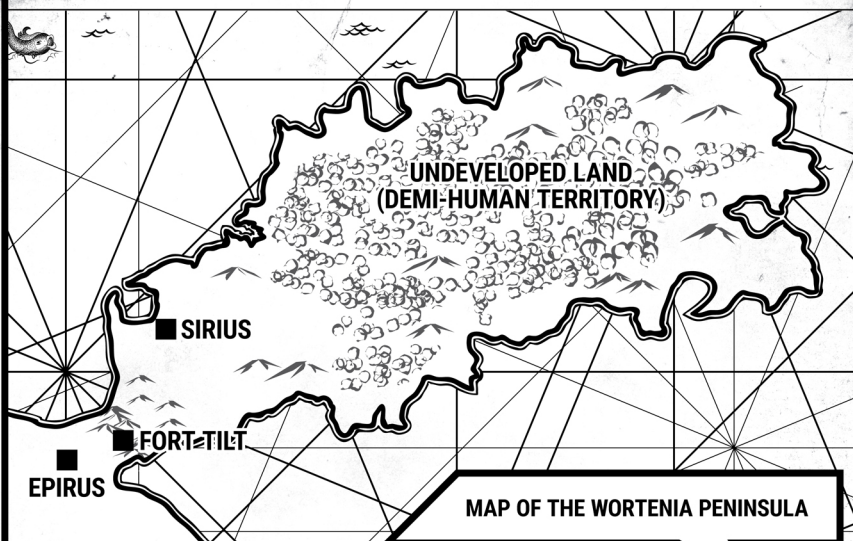
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Prologue

Morning mist clung to the city of Sirius as the sun began to peek over the eastern horizon, heralding the start of a new day. It was just past six in the morning, a time when no one wanted to leave the warm embrace of the covers, but they were forced to get out of bed and get prepared.

Some people didn't live by this schedule, however. Police officers, firefighters, doctors, and even IT engineers worked the night shift. A developed society blessed with the convenience of modernity didn't always see much difference between day and night. The price of progress was that some people had to live outside their natural routine.

This was true, in a sense, even in this world. While there were no police officers or firefighters, the maids and attendants to the nobility had to work throughout the night to keep up with their duties, as did soldiers and guards out patrolling.

Soldiers walked in groups of five, holding up torches or lamps to guide their way as they patrolled the streets of Sirius. In a way, they functioned similarly to modern society's police force or even the army. There was little regard for public safety in this world, and even with the barrier pillars protecting the city, vicious monsters still prowled nearby. For the people living in the dangerous Wortenia Peninsula, these guards were very much a lifeline.

Even so, their job was merely to react in case of an emergency. Strictly speaking, unless something happened, they were relatively free. What's more, Ryoma Mikoshiba paid the soldiers on night duty extra, so it wasn't an undesirable job. It did disrupt one's daily rhythm, but in exchange for losing the meager happiness of a daily routine, they were compensated monetarily.

Some people, on the other hand, engaged in work even more detached from a daytime schedule than those who guarded the city.

At the heart of Sirius was Baron Ryoma Mikoshiba's estate, and its kitchen was, despite the early hour, abuzz with activity.

"Are you done boiling the potatoes?! If you are, peel and crush them right away!"

"Is the oven clear? Then please handle this bread next."

"Are you finished roasting the pork? Get it to the dining hall while it's still hot!"

“The maid preparing the dining hall just said she doesn’t have enough soup bowls! What are they doing?! Hurry up and wash those dishes!”

Aggressive shouts filled the kitchen, along with the loud clanging of pots and cooking utensils. The cooks continued to stir while the children hired as their apprentices swiftly handed down instructions to the servants.

The kitchen was a veritable battlefield. After all, they were charged with feeding the hundreds of soldiers who guarded the city with their lives. Moreover, this was breakfast, the most important meal of the day. Breakfast provided the brain with the glucose it needed to function—a fact of biology just as true in this world.

For that reason, they couldn’t just serve them soup and bread and be done with it. An average noble might have approved of this to save on costs, but that certainly wasn’t the case for Baron Mikoshiba. He managed not only how much food was provided, but also its quality. He took into account the nutritional balance of their meals, in order to better satisfy the hungry soldiers.

Additionally, he ordered the cooks to prioritize flavor. Between that and the quality of the ingredients, these meals were quite expensive, even before accounting for all the hard work the cooks put into them.

Among the cooks working desperately over the pots, one person stood out—the woman who managed this kitchen. She was wearing a white, unblemished cook’s coat and calmly stirring a pot in her dedicated corner of the kitchen, where none of the other cooks were permitted to intrude.

That said, she wasn’t slacking off. Compared to the tumult around her, she seemed to be moving slowly, but she was gazing into the pot with the earnest eyes of a soldier marching into combat. Whenever scum floated up in the pot, she swiftly scooped it out. It was as if she were fighting a duel with her ingredients.

After some time, the woman dipped her personal ladle into the pot, scooped up a bit of the soup, and placed it on a platter. She then brought the platter to her shapely lips to check the aroma.

It smells...good. Kikuna nodded, confirming that the aroma matched what she had in mind. She’d gotten through the first phase.

Kikuna was using the flesh of a monster called a great horn, which was similar to a sheep. The dark elf tribes provided it to the Mikoshiba barony through trading. With this and the vegetables also provided by the dark elves, she was employing her mastery of French cuisine to prepare a long-simmered soup.

While the monster was similar to a sheep, it wasn’t anything like the domesticated goats with which modern people were familiar. It

was closer to the wild breeds of sheep, like the mouflon or the argali, except much larger. As its name applied, the great horn had a large horn protruding from its head and was both omnivorous and extremely combative. The massive beast charged with terrifying force, and its horn could easily pierce the plate armor that knights wore, to say nothing of the leather armor adventurers donned. Once the great horn dispatched its target with this dangerous charge, it would immediately devour its victim.

Be that as it may, even this fearsome monster was occasionally hunted down by humans. In modern society, it was akin to a hunting club shooting a dangerous bear or wild boar.

“Now to taste it...”

Kikuna Samejima brought the platter to her rosy lips, but then her hand froze. Her expression clouded over with hesitation, confusion, and anxiety. She had polished her skills as a chef for many years, so pausing like this was highly unusual for her. Her reaction was justified, however.

I've never cooked with a monster like this before. Well, it's not unlike cooking gibier, but I need to check the balance of the meat's flavor.



In French cuisine—Kikuna's speciality—gibier was any wild game hunted with traps or guns. Monsters weren't entirely the same as rabbits or ducks, but they weren't entirely unlike them either. Besides, when it came to a chef of her experience and skill, cooking monster meat wasn't that big of a hurdle.

Even so, Kikuna couldn't help but feel uneasy about working with completely unknown ingredients. Her task wasn't simply to create a dish that tasted okay; she needed to create a delicacy. After all, the person she was cooking for placed importance on taste.

Of course, unlike a potter and gourmet from a certain cooking manga, she wasn't going to throw away the pot and start all over if the tasting didn't go well. In the manga, he made his wife start from scratch over and over again. If one did that in modern society, it might come across as workplace harassment or lead to divorce in a family setting.

Even so, the manga was beloved as a symbol of the manga culture of Japan's Showa period, and it did spark an interest in cooking for many of its readers. Actually, it had inspired Kikuna to pursue a career as a chef when she read it in elementary school.

If I ran into a man like that in real life, I'd be disgusted. Personally, I'd kick him out of my store.

Kikuna's line of thought was an attempt to distract herself from reality. Thinking back to the manga that had been her personal bible, she cracked a self-deprecating smile. Offering delicious food was a chef's duty, but taste differed by the individual and could be swayed by factors like temperature and one's physical condition. Tastes could even change by country. Dishes that were sloppily made or ones that contained something they shouldn't were out of the question, but in the end, whether something was delicious depended on the person. Even if the dish she presented didn't suit someone's palate, that didn't necessarily say anything about her skill as a cook.

I suppose since it's a character from a manga, they're an exaggerated caricature of real life.

By comparison, the person who was about to taste this dish was much less stern and peculiar. He wouldn't throw the soup away if he didn't like how it tasted, nor would he hurl insults, but he would give accurate criticism. His criticism had been spot-on ever since the day Kikuna had started cooking for him too.

He's surprisingly knowledgeable.

The person in question didn't like being called a gourmet or an epicure, but he did, in fact, act like a model example of those words. He must have been raised in an affluent home.

Despite his age, he must have dined in different restaurants all across

Japan. Or maybe he cooked every day with carefully picked ingredients. Either way, it's clear he understands the intricacies of taste.

This was a happy coincidence for Kikuna, who had been ordered by Akitake Sudou to spy on the Mikoshiba barony. Chefs loved nothing more than cooking for people with discerning palates. Anyone could say if a dish was delicious or not, but few people could read the intent and originality behind the way a chef prepared it.

Cultivating those traits required an innately unique sense of taste as well as a wealth of experience in enjoying cuisine. Even many of this world's wealthiest nobles lacked these valuable attributes. They might have dined on fine cuisine, as one would expect of their wealth and high social status, yet their meals were made in fixed ways for fear of poisoning. Their chefs were forced into predetermined templates.

In other words, though they were nobles and royals, the higher classes didn't enjoy fine cuisine as much as they might have believed. To someone living in Tokyo, a city full of fine cuisine, this level of cooking would come across as sorely lacking.

In the days since Kikuna had been called into this world, she had extended her services to nobles, who'd praised her unique and novel dishes, but most of them couldn't recognize the intention and originality she put into her cooking. This was why she appreciated the fact that fate had brought her to an employer who could truly appreciate her talents, and she felt driven to present him with results she could take pride in—even if her employment under him was only a sham.

When Kikuna finally tried the soup in her platter, her concerns were completely forgotten.

"Mm, yes... It tastes good," she whispered as she put the platter down. It was then that she heard a man speak to her from behind.

"Now that's an appetizing smell. I'm looking forward to breakfast already."

Kikuna turned around to see a large, built man clad in a tuxedo. Despite the early hour, he wore a red butterfly necktie. For formalwear, he was immaculately dressed, but he was in a kitchen, the realm of cooks. Outsiders like him were not welcome here.

Normally, she would have driven the man out of her kitchen at once, but all she did was glance at him and wordlessly return to her business. She then took a basket full of freshly baked rolls left by one of her assistants and placed it on a wagon, alongside soup plates and other dishes.

"Thank you for waiting, Mr. Zheng," she said in a flat, businesslike manner. "Here is Master Koichiro's breakfast. Feel free to take it away."

Kikuna's attitude was perfectly acceptable on a surface level; both she and the man were just doing their jobs. At the same time, she was acting very distant toward Zheng. He didn't respond to her with confusion or displeasure, however. He simply nodded with a serene smile and pushed the wagon out of the kitchen.

She threw a glance at him over her shoulder, watching him leave, and resumed her cooking.

Some time passed after that. The needles of the mechanical clock on the wall nearly pointed at nine in the morning. With the warlike tumult of breakfast behind them, the kitchen staff had a thirty minute break before beginning lunch preparations. A few workers still moved hurriedly about the kitchen, but it was essentially the calm before the storm.

Kikuna remained in the kitchen, polishing and sharpening her trusty knife while lost in thought.

Should I find the chance to speak to them?

This question had been on her mind ever since she'd escaped Epirus along with the rest of the workers at Count Salzberg's estate and made her way to Pireas. The faces of two people filled her thoughts. One was the Chinese man she saw earlier, Zheng Motoku, and the other was a Russian beauty with snow-white skin, Veronica Kozlova.

The two of them were currently acting as personal attendants to Koichiro Mikoshiba, grandfather of the Wortenia Peninsula's governor, Ryoma Mikoshiba. They served as Koichiro's butler and secretary respectively, but they were effectively his bodyguards.

That in and of itself wasn't strange. As the master of this estate, Ryoma, acknowledged them. The problem was that they were both high-ranking members of the Organization. Zheng Motoku was set to inherit Liu Daijin's position as one of the elders, and Veronica was the supreme commander of its operative unit, the Hunting Dogs. She was also the military commander over the Organization's operations in the western continent's eastern regions.

To Kikuna, who was a mere fringe operative of the Organization, their stations were vastly out of reach, and they were far superior to her. So what were two major figures like them doing in this barely inhabited frontier land? Why were they acting so subservient to Koichiro Mikoshiba? She honestly didn't know. The preliminary materials her contact in the Organization had given her when she was assigned this task didn't mention anything about this situation.

Am I just misunderstanding things? No, that can't be true.

For a moment, she considered that she might have mistaken someone else for Zheng and Veronica, but they looked exactly as

described and introduced themselves with the same names. Their ethnicities matched too. It had to be them.

They probably don't know my name, but they must know I'm from the Organization.

The Organization was like an international conglomerate in modern society. It was impossible to know the names and faces of every single member. Nonetheless, Zheng and Veronica were major figures in the Organization, second only to the elders. They were akin to a company's board members, while Kikuna was an ordinary employee. While she would recognize them and know their names, they wouldn't know hers. She was unsure of how to act because of that.

Honestly, I wish I could consult Sir Sudou right now.

She knew that was impossible. Sudou had assigned her this mission, but he was occupied with overseeing operations in the Organization and acting as an operative for the O'tormea Empire, meaning he had to travel all around the continent. It was difficult for her to get in touch with him. Plus, she couldn't go out of her way to contact him because it would blow his cover.

This was also why she couldn't approach Zheng. Spying focused on gathering intelligence, and subterfuge required total secrecy.

I doubt those two would be handling that sort of job, though.

Still, she couldn't fully discredit the possibility either, so she didn't take the risk.

Who is Koichiro Mikoshiba, anyway?

As far as she could see, Zheng and Veronica treated Koichiro with the utmost respect, and they were doing so far too earnestly for them to be acting. This made Kikuna doubt herself all the more. She felt like she was lost in a maze with no way out.

Fortunately, someone who could erase those doubts called out to her.

“Sharpening a kitchen knife on your time off, are you? If you don't mind, may I have a word?”

Kikuna shuddered at this unexpected voice, but her surprise was only momentary. She turned around and found it was exactly who she thought it would be.

He really is...

Kikuna Samejima was a chef. During her life on Rearth, she was neither a soldier nor a warrior, yet since being called into this world, she'd had to fight on the battlefield, giving her combat experience and skill. She wasn't so careless as to let someone sneak up on her unawares, so the fact that someone had just done that alarmed her greatly. She had to admit that this man was more skilled than she was.

Kikuna remained silent and nodded to Zheng, her eyes fixed on

him questioningly. "If you have something to discuss, can we take this conversation elsewhere?"

The two of them were alone right now, but many cooks were still going in and out of the kitchen, preparing to get back to work. Considering the nature of the conversation they were about to have, it would make sense that he'd want to avoid any prying eyes and ears.

Zheng, however, shook his head in denial. "No, that won't be necessary. Nika is keeping watch outside the kitchen. If anyone tries to come in, she'll let us know."

Kikuna nodded.

I see. In that case...

Given Zheng and Veronica's relationship, it made sense that the two of them were here together, and Kikuna had wondered why Veronica wasn't here for this conversation. The fact that she was acting as a lookout explained her absence.

Kikuna sat on an empty crate that had once contained vegetables while Zheng brought a chair from the kitchen's corner and sat as well. They faced each other.

"What did you want to talk to me about, then?" she asked, the first to speak.

"I think you already know, Ms. Samejima," Zheng replied, implicitly asking her to stop beating around the bush.

His words were quite vague and open to interpretation, but she understood his intent perfectly. This soothed the doubt in her heart ever so slightly. With this, she knew the man before her was exactly who she thought he was.

"I see. So you two really are..."

"Yes. It's as you suspect."

This was what she'd expected to hear, perhaps the obvious answer to her doubts. They matched their names and descriptions, and they gave off a certain air of power and might that couldn't be fully masked. At the same time, this revelation created more questions.

Who is that old man, Koichiro Mikoshiba? Why do they treat him with so much respect?

Zheng must have picked up on her doubts, because his lips curved into a smile. His eyes, on the other hand, glinted sharply.

"Are you curious about Lord Koichiro?"

"Lord...Koichiro. Is he part of the Organization?" Kikuna asked.

She'd arrived at the natural conclusion. Zheng was a top-ranking member of the Organization, and despite being out of earshot of everyone else, he still treated Koichiro with the utmost respect. His reverence for the older man must have been genuine, which meant that Koichiro Mikoshiba ranked even higher than a potential future elder.

To Kikuna's surprise, Zheng shook his head in denial. "He is deeply involved with the Organization, yes, but his status is probably not what you think it is."

"What do you mean?" she asked, confused.

Zheng held out his hand and cut her off. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I can't elaborate on that. At least not until I confirm the reason you're here."

"My reason?"

"Surely you won't say you were hired by the Mikoshiba barony by coincidence."

Kikuna was at a loss.

It wasn't a coincidence, no. He knows that much. But I'm not sure if I should tell the truth.

Kikuna and Zheng were part of the same Organization, but whether they were on the same side was questionable. The Organization was, in truth, a congregation of several smaller companies, mercenary groups, and guilds, all led by the elders. It wasn't a monolith, but more a corporate group or a collection of associated companies. Two people could be members of the Organization, but that didn't mean they necessarily cooperated with each other. In fact, it was very likely they competed over the same prey. Even if Zheng was a top-ranking member and a future elder, she couldn't carelessly answer his question.

But...

As far as Kikuna knew, Sudou eyed Ryoma with caution, but he didn't want him eliminated. If nothing else, he hadn't ordered Ryoma's assassination yet. That much was clear, because Sudou had ordered her to go undercover as a chef and gather information for him.

Based on his tone and attitude, if I mean Ryoma no harm, going out of my way to deny it would be a bad play.

This was Kikuna's intuition speaking, but based on Zheng's attitude, this was the only conclusion she could have arrived at. Therefore, she decided to answer truthfully.

"I was ordered by my superior, Akitake Sudou, to serve the Mikoshiba barony and gather information. That is all."

"That is all, you say... Hm."

Zheng's response was difficult to read. It was too vague for her to tell if there was any hostility in it. Nevertheless, he didn't question her any further. He merely crossed his arms and patted his chin with his right hand in pensive silence.

"I see... Well, from what I understand, Mr. Sudou doesn't wish to eliminate Ryoma Mikoshiba, yes?"

This was Kikuna's impression of the situation, and it appeared this

third-party onlooker came to the same conclusion.

“You think so too?” she asked.

“Yes. The northern subjugation army is about to march on the peninsula. If he wanted to eliminate Ryoma, now would be the opportune moment to do so. If that were his plan, he wouldn’t have sent you to sniff out information.”

Being a chef, Kikuna could easily poison a meal, and with Lupis Rhoadserian’s army of two hundred thousand men on the way, the Mikoshiba barony’s security forces would have its sights set on the approaching external threat. That would make it easier for a mole to act. If Akitake Sudou had let this golden chance slip by, the only conclusion was that he must not want Ryoma dead.

Lord Zheng doesn’t seem displeased with that either. That must mean that the Organization as a whole doesn’t see the Mikoshiba barony as an enemy.

Kikuna had no way of knowing what kinds of plots the Organization’s top brass was working on, but learning that it didn’t have any intention of crushing the Mikoshiba barony relieved some corner of her heart.

Lord Zheng is a future elder, and Veronica is commander of the Hunting Dogs. If they decide to do so, the Organization could even extend its support to the barony.

That kind of support could be essential for the Mikoshiba barony to repel the northern subjugation army. Of course, given the Organization’s nature, it would be difficult to openly deploy its operative units, but it could use the guild to encourage mercenaries to join and provide war funds and supplies through the companies under its ownership. Even that little would go a long way at lightening the barony’s burdens.

All kinds of possibilities arose in Kikuna’s mind, and she couldn’t help but chide herself for feeling this way.

I guess I shouldn’t let this concern me, but...

She was in a peculiar position. She was only at the Mikoshiba barony because her superior, Sudou, had ordered her to spy on them. In this regard, she had no attachment or loyalty to Ryoma or his domain. Or rather, she had no attachment to them initially. However, though she was a bit conflicted, she was satisfied overall.

I’m not sure if that’s a good thing, though.

Since she was both a chef and a mole, she wasn’t supposed to grow attached to the people and the group she was infiltrating. She shouldn’t have felt this way, but she did grow to feel more or less at home in the Mikoshiba barony. Maybe it was simply because its governor, Ryoma Mikoshiba, had been summoned from Japan like her. She couldn’t remain entirely unbiased because of that. His actions

often conflicted themselves; he had the kindness typical of the Japanese, but he also had the adaptability needed to adjust to this world and the makings of a conqueror. Looking at him reminded her of her homeland, but it also filled her with expectation for the future.

Besides, I feel surprisingly at home in this kitchen.

She realized that Ryoma was likely taking measures to protect himself all the while, but the fact that the governor was willingly eating the dishes she prepared, despite her being relatively new to the barony, struck her as very daring. All of that made Kikuna feel like working in this barony wasn't that bad—even if she knew it was only a dream that was bound to end sooner or later.

Zheng rose from his seat, though she couldn't tell if he had any inkling of what was going through her mind.

“Are we done?” she asked.

“Yes, for today, at least.” He nodded briefly. “Miss Samejima, conduct yourself as you have until now. If anything comes up, I will come speak to you again.”

She'd probably given him the answers he wanted to hear.

Kikuna watched Zheng leave the kitchen, a mixture of hope and unease hidden in her heart.

Veronica, who'd been leaning against the wall with her arms crossed as she stood watch, called out to Zheng. He had just left the kitchen after talking with Kikuna Samejima. Once she confirmed no one was around, she walked over to his side.

“The talk ended well, from the looks of it?” she asked. She already had an idea of the outcome, but her curiosity was natural.

Zheng nodded briefly. “Yes, for the time being...” he replied, trailing off.

“Did she say something to concern you? Don't tell me an assassination order was issued...”



Zheng shook his head. "There wasn't anything suspicious about her. She really was sent by the Organization to spy on the Mikoshiba barony, but she hasn't been ordered to do anything else. The Organization is probably desperate to get information on the Mikoshiba barony, so this isn't a surprise."

"But there's something else troubling you, isn't there?" Veronica asked.

"Yes..." Zheng replied. "I get the distinct feeling that someone is moving against the Organization's will."

Most people summoned into this cutthroat world from Rearth were overwhelmed by fate's whimsy, so it made sense that Ryoma, who'd clawed his way up to nobility without any help from the Organization and was about to wage war with one of the three kingdoms of the east, would draw the group's attention.

The Organization would have to decide whether to eliminate him or to bring him to their side, and that decision required knowing what kind of man Ryoma was. To that end, it was neither unusual nor suspicious that Akitake Sudou sent Kikuna to gather information on the Mikoshiba barony.

But is that really all he's after?

Zheng had heard about the Organization's past internal strife from Liu Daijin and Koichiro. He knew that quite a few of its members would stop at nothing if it would get them back to their old lives. Zheng didn't know if Sudou had those proclivities, but since there was no way of knowing what secrets the human heart held, Zheng had to be cautious around Sudou.

"You think someone in the Organization is acting of their own accord?" Veronica asked.

"Yes. Just like when the homecoming faction, which sought to return to Rearth no matter what the cost or the sacrifice, clashed with its opposition."

Veronica's neutral expression turned into a scowl. This topic was taboo, and no one in the Organization wished to or was allowed to touch on it, but Veronica didn't argue back because she had her own suspicions.

"There was that sniping incident in the Cannat Plains too," Zheng continued.

"Did she have anything to say about that? You did ask her about it, right?"

"No. Samejima is just a chef, so it's unlikely she had anything to do with that. I doubt she'd ever be able to lie convincingly to me. But the man giving her orders, Akitake Sudou... I'm not so sure about him..."

“You think Sudou’s pulling the strings behind the scenes? It’s certainly possible, but why would he do that? There has to be a reason.”

“I wouldn’t know about that either. In the end, the Organization is a gathering of independent groups. I’m not privy as to what other groups are up to.”

“Right. If you start suspecting people, there’s no end of things to question...” Veronica muttered.

She didn’t want to suspect her fellow Organization members, but at the same time, she couldn’t write off Zheng’s misgivings either.

That sniper attack was probably a warning from the Organization. If they really wanted the Baron Mikoshiba dead, they’d have aimed for his head.

The existence of firearms was a well-kept secret, so the fact that a sniper rifle had been used implied that someone from the Organization had to have been involved. However, the fact that the sniper hadn’t aimed for Ryoma’s head implied they weren’t ordered to outright assassinate him.

This world’s technology and sciences were far behind Rearth’s standard. The closest it came was alchemy compared to that of the Middle Ages. Synthetic fibers, like the aramid fiber, and things like plastics were nowhere to be found.

But just because this world’s technology was primitive, it didn’t mean that firearms had an overwhelming advantage over all other weapons. Scales and skins gathered from powerful monsters could replicate the defensive properties of synthetic fibers. Martial thaumaturgy could be used to not only reinforce the body’s muscles, but also to heal injuries. While it couldn’t restore wounds in the blink of an eye, like in many fictional stories, thaumaturgy could—assuming one didn’t instantly die and was given proper time to rest—heal wounds that would be impossible to recover from in modern society.

With those factors in mind, if one sought to snipe someone in this world, their only option would be to shoot their target in the head to ensure the kill. That way, the shot would either instantly kill the target or, if it failed to do so, knock them unconscious when the shock waves of the bullet penetrated their skull. This would prevent them from using martial thaumaturgy to save themselves. If one’s brain didn’t function, there was no way they could activate or control any spells.

But anyone in the Organization knows that.

The real issue wasn’t the shot itself, but the meaning behind this presumed warning.

Akitake Sudou’s superior is Akimitsu Kuze, an old friend of Liu Daijin and Lord Koichiro. Was this his plan?

Zheng knew of Kuze, but he had no idea what kind of person he was. All he knew was that, in the past, Kuze, Koichiro Mikoshiba, and Liu Daijin had a falling-out. Moreover, no one in the Organization back then really knew it as it was in the present day. Kuze had become a recluse who rarely showed himself in public, and in a recent Organization assembly, he'd announced that he would be absent due to illness.

It wasn't clear if he was truly ill or if he feigned illness for some other reason. Of course, there was no way to confirm that suspicion, and it was possible that Zheng's concerns were unfounded. Still, he couldn't help but wonder. His warrior's intuition, born of a soldier's training and tempered in countless battles, alerted him that something was off.

"Akitake Sudou and Akimitsu Kuze... What are those two thinking?" he whispered.

The moment those names left Zheng's lips, Veronica's expression clouded over. She instantly understood what Zheng was worried about.

"Yes, I understand," she said. "If you're going to say that much, I'll use my connections to look into things. This Akitake Sudou is *too* strange, and Lord Kuze doesn't show himself. It's possible Sudou did this of his own accord."

If that was true, the way to handle it was obvious. If Sudou were to refuse Veronica and Zheng's orders, they would forcibly crush him. At worst, Veronica would use her authority to order the Hunting Dogs to eliminate Sudou. If Sudou was moving on Kuze's orders, Zheng and Veronica would have no choice but to ask Liu Daijin to use his authority as a fellow elder to put things in order. Either way, they'd have to figure out more about this situation before making a decision.

Veronica's idea demonstrated that she properly understood the situation, but Zheng looked at her with concern.

"Are you sure? I can't promise you that you won't be biting off more than you can chew."

It wasn't likely that this would be a dangerous venture, but it wasn't impossible either, so Zheng's concern was justified.

Veronica gave her lover a composed smile. "Don't worry. I don't hate those two either."

Zheng soon realized who she was referring to, and it made her resolve apparent.

"I see... But do be careful. I don't want to lose you either, Nica..."

Veronica nodded gently—not knowing that this choice would become the spark that triggered new strife.

Chapter 1: A Wavering Heart

That day, rows of soldiers and cavaliers filled the highway—the one leading from Pireas to northern Rhoadseria—that crossed the Cannat Plains. The road was alive with the neighing of steeds and the shouting of soldiers, and visibility was obscured by the clouds of dust they kicked up and left in their wake. Here and there, angered commanders desperate to secure the forward path would yell out. The column of soldiers was abuzz with heat.

“This is feverish... Suffocating, even...” Asuka said as she wiped the sweat from under her helmet with a handkerchief. Clad in armor, she looked around.

It was like a scene from a movie—not a low budget B movie, but an epic production with colossal funding and countless extras. However, even such a production would be held back just by virtue of it being fictional; it couldn’t compare to the overwhelming, palpable presence around her. This would become a great war, where the queen of the kingdom challenged a national hero who’d been marked as a traitor. This was not fiction like what Asuka had seen in books or movies: it was real bloodshed.

The soldiers were aggressive and radiating bloodlust. The location where the battle was estimated to take place was still far off, but the soldiers couldn’t remain relaxed and composed. They were marching into a fight to the death, after all.

The atmosphere hanging over them was intense—practically sizzling. Even Asuka, who had been born in the peaceful embrace of modern Japan, noticed it, and the sight was enough to shake her high school student’s heart. When she remembered that she was an active part of this moment, one that was detached enough from her normal life to pass for a movie scene, it rattled her composure.

It’s like a sea of people... This is what they mean when they say human wave tactics. It’s nothing like what I imagined war to be, though.

Lupis Rhoadserians’s northern subjugation army officially numbered two hundred thousand people. Asuka vaguely recalled hearing the Tokyo Dome had a capacity of fifty-five thousand people. The thought that an army four times that size was marching before her made her dizzy.

Compared to Japanese cities, the army’s numbers were roughly the same as the population of eastern Tokyo. Yet while that

population included women, children, and elderly, the army Asuka was looking at was made up entirely of soldiers.

It could only be described as a vast army, but even so, it was questionable whether its quality was on par with its overwhelming quantity.

There are a lot of soldiers here. Being able to gather and command so many is impressive, but...

Despite being overwhelmed by the sheer size of the army, Asuka could easily pinpoint its flaw.

I'm not sure it's actually a strong army. Most of the people here aren't soldiers by trade, but conscripts. Even if you have them hold weapons, at heart they're still farmers and craftsmen.

Many of these soldiers were commoners who'd been called to arms by their governors' conscription orders. They were hastily prepared troops who simply had weapons forced into their hands and were ordered to march. Since they lived in a world where monsters prowled and bandits attacked villages every day, most weren't complete amateurs at handling a weapon, but they weren't as skilled as a trained soldier. And they certainly weren't as organized or disciplined as the professional soldiers Asuka had in mind.

Besides...

Asuka sighed, looking at the soldiers around her. All their weapons were mass-produced and had been hastily gathered. They weren't faulty weapons by any stretch of the word, but they certainly weren't quality ones either. Perhaps the soldiers were lucky because they weren't using rusty weapons, but looking at the tips of their spears made Asuka sigh again.

Moreover, very few soldiers actually wore helmets and armor. The only defensive equipment they had, if one could even call them that, were wooden shields. In terms of mobility, opting for light equipment was by no means a bad choice, but there was a world of difference between giving the infantry light equipment out of consideration for their load and giving them poor equipment out of a desire to save money.

It makes sense. Weapons and shields aside, actual armor would have to be fit for size, and doing it for so many soldiers...

In a game, armor was just something one could equip on the inventory screen. One could pick up any armor in a dungeon or a cave and use it as is. Having to take the strongest armor in the game, which you picked up before the final boss, back to town to fit it to your character's size would take all the excitement out of the experience. Games were just play meant for fun, after all. A setting too absurd wasn't interesting, but one too realistic and serious was problematic in its own way.

In real life, donning armor wasn't so simple. Just like clothes, armor needed to fit one's size. If it was too big, it would be baggy, and the dangling sleeves or hems would get in the way. If it was too small, it became too tight to move in or perhaps completely unwearable.

With clothes, articles too small to wear wouldn't cost one their life; the same could not be said of armor. If one didn't take the time to fit the armor properly to one's dimensions, the poor fit could end up being the difference between life and death. However, no one wanted to spend that much on so many rank-and-file soldiers, which was what had led to this unfortunate situation.

In this world, conscripts are expendable, so no noble would be crazy enough to spend that much money on them.

That kind of reasoning made no sense in modern society. The importance placed on human life was so great that a politician who'd given in to the demands of terrorists once famously said that "The life of a single person outweighs the Earth." And he said this while knowing that giving in to terrorists could lead to further loss of life.

Regardless of whether it was just or not, modern society always upheld the idea of saving lives in danger. This world, on the other hand, with its strict class system and slavery, didn't operate by this logic. The value of human life was quite low; humans were a replaceable, expendable resource.

Even so, this world had no problem when it came to birth rates. Not even nobles could enjoy the entertainment and distractions people in the modern world had access to, so it was easy for them to succumb to the most basic of impulses: their hunger and their sex drive. It was the same reason that birth rates declined in developed countries, whereas they rose in developing countries.

This was only exacerbated by the fact that life here was far worse than any developing country in Reearth. These conditions incited basic survival instincts, which in turn encouraged people to produce offspring. What's more, the marriageable age for women was the midteens, and in some cases, they married slightly younger. Going past the age of twenty without getting married drew people's apprehension and scorn.

Such young marriages meant that, for better or worse, the chances of successful childbirth were higher. In Japan, until the baby boom in the Showa period, it was common for households to have multiple siblings. Though that might no longer hold water in modern society, the stereotype that the poor had many children might not be entirely unfounded.

Well, even back then, there were families with two children, like grandpa and grandma's.

The Mikoshiya family was an old, wealthy family with a long,

uninterrupted history, but either way, even people in this world were, at their core, creatures driven by their base impulses.

If anything, it's even more pronounced here.

Asuka didn't like having to admit this, but she knew better than to foolishly ignore it. Although human behavior didn't fundamentally change, the two worlds were much too different, and those differences were pretty noticeable.

Modern society had the concept of human rights that served to restrain lust, but this world had no such concept to hold people's desires in check. Here, people's lives were the cheapest commodity. This didn't mean they could be wasted frivolously, though, and most nobles realized this. They didn't send their soldiers to their deaths without so much as equipping them with weapons, but supplying them with armor fitted to each soldier's dimensions wasn't realistic.

Honestly, I'm jealous of them for not having to wear this kind of armor, Asuka thought, looking down at her own armor.

Menea Norberg had ordered the bespoke armor that Asuka now wore. It was plate armor worn by the Temple Knights and emblazoned with the emblem of the Church of Meneos. In terms of defense, it was the finest armor available. Putting aside the issue of its weight and the limited mobility of its joints—problems typical of plate armor—it was the best armor one could wear on the battlefield. The only thing finer than it was armor with expensive endowed thaumaturgy applied to it.

In addition to that, this armor was made to be much lighter than ordinary plate armor, out of consideration for Asuka's physique and stamina. It was literally custom-made for her. Nonetheless, since Asuka wasn't used to wearing it, it still felt like a weight dragging her down. Plus, with the heavy, feverish heat rising from this row of soldiers, she was sweating nonstop. As illogical as she knew it was, she couldn't help but envy the soldiers who walked with light equipment.

Still, Menea, who was her guardian and an older sister figure, had insisted that Asuka's affiliation be made clear, so Asuka couldn't very well argue with her. Since she was, officially speaking, part of this battle as Rodney and Menea's attendant, it was natural she would have to wear armor.

Furthermore, there was one other reason Asuka had to wear this armor—to protect her chastity.

Mr. Tachibana's here too, so I could put it on when we reach the battlefield, but...I guess Menea is right.

In modern Japan, women didn't typically have to worry about how they dressed for fear of being attacked. If Asuka had heard a woman back home express such a fear, she would think that the woman was just extremely self-conscious. She knew sex crimes

weren't unheard of, but she felt like being afraid to dress a certain way for fear of being accosted was as unreasonable as being afraid to go outside for fear of getting in a traffic accident. Japan was a safe country.

In contrast, this world was dangerous. Few women had joined this army, and though some knights were female, most of them came from houses of pedigree—meaning they were commanders who had bodyguards and adjutants fighting at their side. Also, like Menea, most of them were seasoned warriors capable of martial thaumaturgy, so the physical advantage men held over women didn't apply to them.

Asuka was not a knight, though, but a mere commoner. Koichiro Mikoshiba had trained her a little, and she'd been under Rodney and Menea's tutelage since she was summoned here, but she only thought of those skills as a means of self-defense. She wasn't a complete amateur, but she lacked a warrior's resolve. She could be capable of killing someone, but she would struggle to find the will to do so—even if that someone was actively trying to take her life.

In this world, refusing to kill your opponent wasn't a virtue; it was a weakness. And though Asuka wasn't much aware of it herself, she was a pretty girl who drew the attention of those around her. A girl with her looks walking among soldiers like this was like an innocent sheep walking among a pack of starved wolves. It didn't take much imagination to predict what might become of her. Asuka couldn't deny the possibility either.

But I can't believe I have to worry about that. This world is so different from Japan.

If she were in her home world, her only concern about her attire would be if it was trendy. Asuka wasn't that into fashion, but most schoolgirls cared about clothing. Nevertheless, since her looks were above average, people paid attention to how she dressed, so she had to maintain a certain standard of appearance regardless. If she wore something that looked too old or unsightly, it could affect her relationship with her friends.

In Japan, she just needed to worry about dressing appropriately. She couldn't come to formal events in casual clothes, but if she were to walk through town in revealing clothes or miniskirts, she wouldn't be particularly judged for it, nor would it place her at a disadvantage. At worst, people with a sense of public decency might glare at her.

By contrast, in this world, it was dangerous for a woman to walk around in revealing clothes—or even clothes that weren't so provocative. That danger had nothing to do with the threat of ostracization or dirty looks thrown her way. Her life and chastity would be at risk.

Since Asuka was currently in a line of soldiers marching to battle,

her armor was appropriate for the situation. However, the sun beating down on her made her sweat profusely in it.

There's more to it than that, though.

Her feeling so feverish wasn't solely due to the sun; it was also due to the heat these soldiers burning with bloodlust gave off. It was the kind of passion unique to warriors who were confident they were on the cusp of victory.

What gripped them wasn't the fear of battle. Instead, they were spurred ahead by the allure of the riches they could gain. Most of the soldiers involved in the northern subjugation were motivated by this because Lupis Rhoadserians, the queen herself, had approved pillaging the Mikoshiba barony and the northern regions under its control.

Free to pillage the Mikoshiba barony...

This was an appealing compensation that was very hard to come by. After all, even though it was currently under the Mikoshiba barony's occupation, Epirus was still an official territory in the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. The people living there were Queen Lupis's subjects. Despite that, she had given the soldiers permission to pillage the city.

This was a painful decision for her to make, but she had several reasons for doing so. The biggest reason was to get the nobles to participate in the war. No matter how much they hated the Mikoshiba barony, when all was said and done, it was just a personal grudge. The nobles, for all their arrogance, weren't stupid. In fact, when it came to calculating gain against loss, they were quite clever. They may have hated and resented Ryoma for slaying the House of Lords' nobles and killing their blood relatives, but they wouldn't raise an army to strike at him in revenge for that.

That was why Queen Lupis felt it necessary to approve pillaging against the barony. She also declared that those who performed well in the war would be granted the territories of the ten houses of the north, along with the former Salzberg county.

I can't believe she consented to sacrifice her own subjects.

To Asuka, it was nothing short of foolishness. No matter its political system, a country was made up of its citizens. Cutting out its own people was like an act of self-mutilation. Asuka couldn't help but regard Queen Lupis with aversion and disgust, but at the same time, her rational side did understand that the queen's options were limited.

She had no other choice. At least, I can't think of any other option. And since I can't, judging her for her choice would be unfair.

Considering the current state of Rhoadseria, Lupis Rhoadserians didn't have much of a choice. She didn't choose to sacrifice her own people casually, and as a matter of fact, that choice did increase the soldiers' morale. That much was evident from the sheer number of

noble families who participated in the army. Emotions and profit—those two put together were what made this vast army possible.

All the same, that didn't change the fact that Queen Lupis had made this decision, and the shadow of that choice would surely hang over her in the future.

I don't have the right to criticize her choices in the first place.

Asuka had no way of knowing if the head of the Mikoshiba barony truly was the Ryoma she knew. At first, she was convinced it was him, and even now she knew it was highly likely, but so long as she didn't see him directly, she couldn't be sure. Yet was this what Asuka really felt?

No. I probably just don't want to believe it.

Normally, it would be absurd to assume Ryoma, who'd suddenly vanished in school, had been called to this world like Asuka had been. At the same time, it was the natural conclusion, which would mean that Asuka's blood relative was the man behind this war. Of course, since he was her relative, she wanted to protect him. She too was outraged at the absurdity of this cutthroat world.

Even for him, staying alive wouldn't be easy.

Be that as it may, after hearing about the tragedy in the House of Lords, Asuka found it hard to claim that Ryoma was an innocent victim in this. If it were true, there had to be extenuating circumstances. That was the answer Asuka had given Rodney and Menea when they'd asked her about it, but Asuka knew her response amounted to escapism. Coming from a modern world, she felt ill at ease admitting that she was related to a person who'd caused a war.

Knowing that knucklehead, I wouldn't put it past him.

The Ryoma Mikoshiba that Asuka knew was a slumbering hero. His grandfather had fashioned him to be the kind of anachronistic hero that would have been more at home in older times. Ryoma knew this even better than Asuka did. He had the strong, firm body of a brave lion and nerves of steel, along with the venomous fangs and wit of a viper. Equipped with those traits, he slumbered through his ordinary days.

That might sound like a contradictory assessment, but it struck Asuka as accurate. Back in high school, she would teasingly call him a hibernating bear precisely because of this, and many other people had instinctively noticed Ryoma's hidden nature.

Still, despite knowing Ryoma's true nature, Asuka had never once feared him. She knew that Ryoma was well aware that he was different from others and conducted himself with moderation. A katana's blade might be too sharp to hold, but as long as it was sheathed, it wouldn't hurt anyone. Ryoma was much the same way.

If I'm going to liken him to a katana, he'd be less an ordinary one and

more a cursed blade of some sort.

Ryoma was the kind of cursed blade that could live through modern society without ever needing to be drawn. At the same time, if it were unsheathed even once, it would have to shed the blood of another.

And who's to say it was never drawn before.

Asuka knew Ryoma to be a pacifist at heart, and the kind of person who wouldn't rock the boat, but once things crossed a certain threshold, he immediately became much more dangerous.

One time, during primary school, he reported their homeroom teacher, who'd decided to overlook a series of bullying incidents, to the Tokyo Board of Education, resulting in the teacher's disciplinary dismissal. Another time, he resorted to physical means to drive away a group of delinquents who hung out in a park near his house.

Even so, there was no definite proof that Ryoma had been involved in either of those incidents. With the teacher, he sent a video recording of their neglectful actions to the police, proving there was a major issue and causing a huge commotion over it, but the email address that sent the recording was a throwaway account from a PC in a public library. It was never discovered who sent it. With the incident in the park, it was deemed to be a case of young delinquents fighting among themselves and wasn't looked into any further.

Interestingly, both cases had one thing in common: Asuka was at risk of being harmed in some way.

He could never put up with seeing his family being hurt, but the problem is that he springs into action before one of us gets hurt.

Both of those incidents could have been coincidences. Anyone with the legal knowledge and inclination to stop the teacher could have reported them to the authorities and had them dismissed. In fact, that made it much less likely that Ryoma—a primary schooler at the time—had done it.

The case with the delinquents, on the other hand, was clearly different. The rumors claimed that they had clashed with another group of delinquents, but all of their injuries had been inflicted by someone using their bare hands. It was also known that the delinquents carried weapons on them, like knives.

Anyone that could beat a group of armed hooligans with their bare hands has to be skilled.

Most damning of all, though, was that most of the delinquents had been so severely injured that they would never recover. None of them died, but someone had inflicted permanent damage, and intentionally at that—as if to ensure that they would never harm anyone else for as long as they lived.

This wasn't to say that Ryoma was the only one capable of that.

Japan had a population of over 120,000,000 people, and many of them practiced martial arts such as karate and judo. While relatively few people were martial artists, there were other people out there who were capable of doing that much damage to the delinquents. That said, would those boys do anything to prompt a random martial artist to hurt them that much? No. It was more plausible that Ryoma had exacted retribution at the possibility of Asuka getting hurt.

I suppose it could have been grandpa too.

In the end, this was all speculation on Asuka's part with no proof to back it, but if Ryoma had done those things, she wouldn't be surprised. Rather, it was the natural conclusion. Ryoma was her cousin and childhood friend, and she knew his personality and nature. She knew his firm, self-righteous sense of justice, and she knew that once he had marked someone as an enemy, he would show them no mercy. Because he had that firm and even problematic side to him, she could only imagine how he would react to this unjust otherworld.

He wouldn't stand for it.

He would be outraged at seeing the upper classes arrogantly trample the weak. His sense of justice and ethics were almost naive, but they were backed by cold, calculated ruthlessness. He would carefully consider when to begrudgingly tolerate this world's absurdity because it benefited himself and those close to him, and when to oppose it with bloodshed. Depending on the choices he made, Ryoma would either follow this world's rule of survival of the fittest or forcefully try to bend it to his will.

When the time came to place blame, at the end of the bloodstained tragedies he caused, Ryoma wouldn't let the guilt fall squarely on him. If nothing else, he surely would come up with some just cause that would spare him from that.

He's meticulous that way.

The only questions were why Ryoma, in his calculations, had decided to start the war now, and whether he had the means to win against such a vast army.

I can guess what he's after, but... Does he have a winning chance after making so many enemies?

Asuka knew Ryoma well, and he had a fundamentally lazy side to him, especially toward things he wasn't inclined to do. He was the type who'd let work pile up and do it all over a short period of time. When he had gotten homework for summer vacation, he had done it all in the last week rather than chip away at it every day.

In that regard, she could see him prompting all his enemies to band together so he could sweep them all away at the same time. What's more, focusing his wars into one big, decisive conflict, as opposed to sluggishly fighting through individual opponents, would

minimize his losses in both human life and material resources. Concentrating the enemy's forces in order to shrink them down all at once had a certain strategic logic to it. Asuka had to question the validity of that choice in this case, but the only way to determine that would be to see who eventually won the war.

Even though Ryoma was feared and celebrated as the Devil of Heraklion, he was still a single governor going up against an entire country. Asuka couldn't see a scenario where the Mikoshiba barony won this war.

An army of two hundred thousand... What kind of plan could get him out of this? Asuka glanced at the sight outside her carriage. *All these soldiers are his enemies...*

While each individual soldier was by no means strong, there were simply too many of them, and they would all overrun the Mikoshiba barony like a swarm of angry bees.

Asuka narrowed her eyes against the cloud of dust the soldiers and horses kicked up, lamenting her inability to do anything but watch the fight. While doing so, Asuka didn't notice the man sitting beside her watching her...

Genzou Tachibana glanced at Asuka as he held the horse's reins. He'd never driven a carriage during his life in Japan, but people were capable of adapting to anything, and by now, he'd become rather good at handling a horse. It all came to him naturally.

However, despite his confident demeanor, his heart was torn.

Don't say anything unnecessary. Stay natural. Act natural...

As an adult, Tachibana felt driven to reach out to Asuka and soothe her worries. He could tell she was brooding over something, and moreover, he knew what it was. He'd spent quite some time with her ever since they'd been summoned to this world.

Moreover, Tachibana had served in the Community Safety Section before being summoned, but he'd originally been in the fourth criminal investigations section and was a skilled investigator who'd faced off against criminal organizations. This gave him insight into the human heart, which had made him adept at reading people. To him, reading the heart of a girl less than half his age was easy, but just because he could tell what she was feeling, it didn't mean he knew how to properly handle this situation.

I wish I could help her, but with things being what they are... I wish I could at least say something considerate to make her feel a little better, but I'm no good at that.

Tachibana had spent his life fixedly pursuing his career as an officer, so he was still an affluent bachelor, but that wasn't to say he had problems with women. He wouldn't go so far as to claim he was

good at handling them, but he wasn't lacking in experience. Nonetheless, when it came to a girl who was so much younger than he was, he struggled with what to say.

Moreover, Tachibana was beginning to feel something special toward Asuka Kiryuu—not romantic feelings, of course, given their age gap, but a sense of affinity separate from his innate sense of duty as an officer of the law. He saw her as a younger sister or a niece. Those feelings made him err in judgment, though, and Asuka's current circumstances were far too complicated and confusing for him to set her at ease.

What would be right? "Don't worry?" "It'll be fine?" How could I tell her that?

If Ryoma Mikoshiba really was who Asuka thought he was, then her blood relative was about to be executed for treason, and she was currently in the midst of soldiers who were all intent on killing him. Regardless of whether she knew for sure if Baron Mikoshiba was her cousin, she would still be hard-pressed to stay composed in this situation.

To begin with, would anything I say even matter? I'm powerless.

Menea and Rodney might have been able to ease her worries, but in his current state, any eloquent words Tachibana might have come up with wouldn't have felt credible. In this world, he was nothing but a commoner with no backing.

I'm a nobody in this world...

When he was a police officer, his words had been genuine and brimming with confidence. His position, his badge, his sidearm—his tools of the trade gave him power to soothe or scold others. That was the kind of invisible trust and power given to police officers. That trust has been shaken in recent years due to corruption, but being an officer of the law still gave one an air of authority.

Now that he was in this world, his job was a thing of the past. He still had his firm body and martial arts experience, and thanks to Menea and Rodney, he'd learned martial thaumaturgy and gained a position as an official attendant in the Church of Meneos. He could even go on to become an official knight serving under Rodney. At present, though, he was but one of many prospective knights in training, his social position was still that of a powerless commoner, and his words, no matter how sincere, held no sway over anyone.

All I can do is ask Rodney to talk to her. This is pathetic.

Tachibana glanced at Asuka again, sighed, and drove the horse onward, praying that all her doubts would soon be resolved.



That night, the northern subjugation army stopped its march and

set up camp on a field outside the highway's barrier pillars. The moon hung in the starry night sky, casting its faint glow on the earth as if it were lighting the army's path north. In the midst of this scene, Rodney Mackenna sat alone in his tent, lost in thought. He was occupied with what Tachibana had told him earlier about Asuka's state of mind.

What should I do?

Unable to organize his thoughts, Rodney grabbed a bottle of ale from the shelf and took a swig directly from it. The alcohol spilled from his lips and onto his chest, forming a stain on his expensive silk shirt. As he drank, the tent's flap opened and Menea entered. Seeing him, she gave him a criticizing glare.

"That's a waste of expensive ale," she said as she snatched the bottle out of his hand. "And you're staining your shirt too. I swear. You better wash it later, understood? You're not a child."

She poured the ale into a glass sitting on the table and handed it to Rodney.

"Hmph. Mind your own business," he said, his expression visibly displeased. Despite this, he reluctantly took the glass from her hands, which made it clear that Menea was the stronger one in their relationship. It wasn't uncommon in friendships that had lasted since childhood for the woman to have a stronger say over the man.

Giving him a wry smirk, Menea settled into a nearby chair. "So, what are you going to do?" she asked without specifying a subject.

Nevertheless, Rodney knew what she meant, and his expression contorted unpleasantly. "I'm of two minds, honestly."

"I see..." Menea nodded like she'd expected him to say that. "But leaving her like this wouldn't be right," she added hesitantly.



When Tachibana approached them about Asuka earlier, it hadn't come as a surprise, but that didn't mean they knew how to handle it.

"I know. But what am I supposed to do?" Rodney asked.

"Sending her to the Mikoshiba barony is an option?" Menea suggested.

That would have been a valid choice, but due to the many risks it involved, they couldn't do that.

"I considered that already. While that might be the best thing to do for her, we can't exactly do much in this situation, can we?"

"True..." Menea sighed. "If nothing else, it'd be difficult without definitive proof that Baron Mikoshiba is the Ryoma Mikoshiba she knows. Asuka herself can't tell for sure."

"Yeah. I think so too."

In nine cases out of ten, Baron Mikoshiba would be Asuka's cousin. When they left Menestia, they had been very much convinced of that, but once they entered Rhoadseria, Asuka had started doubting it. Since they spoke to her every day, they could sense the change in her right away.

When she first heard Ryoma's name mentioned, Asuka had been so excited that she didn't stop to consider the information's authenticity. However, the more intelligence they gained about the Mikoshiba barony, the more she began questioning if he was really the man she knew.

That's understandable, considering Asuka's position.

People had a way of believing whatever they wanted to believe. After being summoned to this world so suddenly and separated from her guardian, Koichiro, Asuka had latched onto any information about Ryoma, no matter how vague and uncertain. Rodney and Menea couldn't fault her for doing so.

But that means...

They brought Asuka all the way here because she believed Ryoma was her cousin, and Rodney was at a loss as to what to do if that was proven wrong.

For now, though, it's obvious what we have to do, isn't it?

There was only one way of confirming the truth, and that would be to meet Ryoma in person. Rodney and Menea knew this, and so did Tachibana and Asuka, but it was easier said than done. Now that they'd been integrated into Queen Lupis's northern subjugation army, contacting Ryoma became much more difficult. If news that they were trying to get in touch with him reached the queen's ears, they could be punished for high treason.

Plus, Asuka's feelings aren't the only problem here.

As long as Rodney's misgivings remained at large, he couldn't

make the decision to send Asuka to Ryoma.

“The biggest issue is that even if Baron Mikoshiba is related to Asuka, so long as the barony remains at a disadvantage, it’s questionable whether it would even mean anything,” Rodney muttered.

Menea nodded. “Right. As her guardians, it’s hard to say this would be the right decision in this situation. If the Mikoshiba barony can’t win this war, we’d be sending her to her death.”

They wanted to send her to the Mikoshiba barony with the hopes that it would be her salvation, but not if it meant placing her on a sinking ship. The risks they’d have to brave to contact Ryoma would be great, and with the stakes of the war stacked against them, they weren’t worth taking in the first place.

“We could do something after the war, but at that point, it would be even harder to contact Ryoma Mikoshiba.”

“Yes, I imagine so. Given our position, it’s very likely.”

The reason for that was simple: Rodney and Menea had come all the way to the eastern kingdoms from the holy city of Menestia, on the other side of the continent, to serve as bodyguards for Cardinal Roland. Cardinal Roland had made this long journey with the final objective of gauging what Ryoma Mikoshiba was capable of and trying to win him over to the Church of Meneos’s side. On paper, the purpose of this journey was to inspect the different sites across the continent, but that was only a trivial pretense.

In actuality, it’s an espionage mission.

That might have sounded like an incredibly corrupt task for a religious organization that was otherwise detached from worldly affairs, but the term “espionage” wasn’t limited to its most common meanings. It wasn’t just spying, sabotage, and infiltration. People in high social stations used it, and it occurred much more often than most would believe.

Rodney’s role was to assist Cardinal Roland with this task, so ensuring the cardinal’s safety was Rodney’s primary objective. Helping Asuka with her personal problems was secondary.

It’s clear where our priorities lie.

Such was the duty of a Temple Knight devoted to defending the Church of Meneos, yet Rodney had never told Cardinal Roland about Asuka’s background. His reasoning for staying silent was that none of this information had been confirmed yet. Of course, Cardinal Roland had seen Asuka a few times before, and had even spent some time in her presence while they were traveling from Menestia, but the whole time, he knew nothing about Asuka’s past or position. He probably thought she was merely a girl Rodney and Menea doted on.

But if Cardinal Roland were to learn the truth...

There was a chance he would welcome Asuka as a guest of the Church of Meneos. Many members of the church were ruthless, but Cardinal Roland was a compassionate man. It was possible that he would sympathize with Asuka's predicament and offer to help.

It was also perfectly possible that he'd take her hostage and use her as a bargaining chip. Compassionate man though he might be, he'd still clawed his way through internal strife within the church to reach the position of cardinal, and no purely benevolent man could have done that. What's more, depending on how negotiations went with the Mikoshiba barony, it was possible Cardinal Roland would order the baron's death.

"That day, we ran into her standing next to a Third Eye's corpse when we passed through Beldzevia on our way back to Menestia. When we took custody of her, we had no idea this would happen..." Rodney shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Was he giving up, perhaps?

Menea gave him a strained smile. "Yes... Agreed."

At first, Rodney had only taken Asuka under his wing out of goodwill, but when he found out that the katana Asuka was holding had the power of endowed thaumaturgy, which shouldn't have been possible, things had changed. Rodney and Menea would have normally seen Asuka purely as a connection to the Organization or bait to lure out Koichiro Mikoshiba—at worst, her safety would have only extended as far as she was valuable—but after spending many days with her, they began seeing her as more than just a pawn.

For a moment, the image of his dead father flashed in Rodney's mind. His expression was grave, like he was scolding Rodney.

As a knight of the Kingdom of Tarja, Rodney's father was given the rank of duke, but he was a wise man who did not deride or oppress the lower classes. That wasn't to say he was a softhearted man incapable of making hard decisions, though. He knew how to deaden his emotions and make difficult calls.

If he saw me now, my father would scold me for this, but...

Rodney hadn't had it in him to sacrifice Asuka for the sake of gaining information on the Organization or Koichiro. All he'd seen was a kind girl, and all he'd wanted to do was to create a safe future for her in this ruthless world.

To that end, he and Menea had secured her an official position as their attendant. It was by no means a high-ranking one—attendants followed their officers and handled miscellaneous affairs for them—but within the Church of Meneos, it wasn't a particularly low-ranking position either. Compared to a noble, it was like being a baron, if not higher.

In addition, Rodney and Menea in particular were high-ranking

Temple Knights. They were respectively captain and vice-captain of one of the ten knights orders defending Menestia. They and their attendants had their futures guaranteed.

Rodney's position might not have always been completely rock solid—Cardinal Bargas, who disliked Rodney, had once dispatched him as captain of a platoon to spy on the southern kingdoms—but that was a thing of the past now. Cardinal Roland respected Rodney's skills as a warrior, and thanks to the cardinal's assistance, Rodney had been promoted to captain of the Temple Knights, knights who guarded the cardinals' lives.

Normally, anyone serving under such a high-ranking knight would have to come from pedigree. Commoners without any background, like Asuka and Tachibana, wouldn't be considered for the role. For that reason, securing their appointment as attendants had taken some effort. Cardinal Roland had voiced no objection, but sizable bribes had been required to silence his followers' complaints.

Rodney had gone that far to protect Asuka's smile.

And I know Menea feels the same way.

After going this far to help Asuka, cutting her off wasn't an option anymore.

We'll just have to wait and see for now.

Rodney elected to maintain the status quo, a choice borne of escapism, in a sense. He chose not to decide for the time being.

"There's nothing we can do right now," Menea said, her smile still tense. "The situation might change once we get closer to the Mikoshiba barony."

They didn't know enough at present, so they decided to take their time and think things through rather than jump in to making a decision. Still, Menea wasn't as optimistic as her words might have made her seem, and neither was Rodney. Their morose expressions spoke to their true feelings—their concern for Asuka. Unfortunately, that concern weakened their sense of caution, so neither of them ever noticed a third person gazing into their tent...

Chapter 2: The Weapon That Is the Weak

A gentle breeze slipped across the plains. On that day, countless banners flapped in the open field to the southwest of the citadel city of Epirus. It was right around lunchtime, and many pillars of smoke rising from kitchen hearths trailed up to the sky.

The campsite, full of soldiers on horseback, was like a battlefield in its own way, and everyone's expressions were stiff and severe. There were two reasons for this. First was that they were quite close to their destination. They had entered northern Rhoadseria, which was currently under Baron Mikoshiba's control, and were now before their first objective, the citadel city of Epirus. No matter how slowly they marched, they were no more than a few days away from bloody combat, and knowing this, they struggled to maintain their composure.

The second reason was despite the fact that war was so close, the Mikoshiba barony had yet to make any moves. They hadn't sent out any scouting parties, nor had they fired a single arrow. It was almost as if they were ignoring the northern subjugation army completely. That lack of response only shook and infuriated the soldiers, further solidifying the air of bloodlust hanging over the campsite. The fact that they couldn't predict what the enemy would do or when they might do it put a significant psychological strain on the army, as well as the commanders leading it.

In one particularly large tent set in the center of the camp, Lupis Rhoadserians grimaced as she whispered in displeasure.

"What is the situation? Why aren't they moving?"

On a table was a map with pawns set upon it, signifying the northern subjugation army that had arrived at Epirus two days prior. Ever since they'd left the capital, Pireas, their march had progressed without issue. It had been smooth sailing so far, to the point that one might think things were advancing swimmingly. If nothing else, there was no visible cause for concern.

Nonetheless, when going up against Ryoma Mikoshiba, things were never that simple, and that knowledge constricted around Queen Lupis's heart like a serpent.

"It's going *too* well." The words spilled from her lips and expressed her unconscious anxiety. "The fact that nothing is wrong

doesn't make sense..."

This was baseless intuition and certainly not worth trusting when mobilizing an army, but Queen Lupis was convinced of this. She was a strong soldier and commander in her own right, renowned among Rhoadseria's people as a general princess who had served as captain of the royal knights, but the truth was that she had never actually commanded troops directly on the battlefield.

In response to the nobles' despotic control of the kingdom, the former sovereign, King Pharst II, had tried to return power to the royal family. Lupis's training as a knight had been one part of that. In other words, she was only a figurehead, an empty symbol with little to no real power. That was why the late General Albrecht had used her as a banner with which to gather and unite his knights' faction.

Lupis was no match for the kingdom of Myest's Ecclesia Marinelle or the O'ltormea Empire's Shardina Eisenheit, but she wasn't a complete amateur when it came to military matters. She had been given the finest military education the royal family could offer her, so even if it was only theoretical knowledge and textbook wisdom, she was still more skilled than most, and even she could tell that this situation wasn't natural.

"It's *him* we're dealing with. He wouldn't just sit back and do nothing..."

Ryoma Mikoshiba was the hated man who'd hurt her pride, but at the same time, he was a fearsome opponent. Queen Lupis knew this and refused to underestimate him. During their march, she'd remained wary by sending scouts in all directions, maintaining an intelligence network that would detect any change. But if the enemy did nothing, staying so alert felt like wasted effort borne of paranoia. It was under unusual situations like this that Queen Lupis's bad habits had a way of surfacing.

"Meltina, is pressing forward like this wrong? Should we maintain our station here and see how things go?"

In a position where they had no information on the enemy's movements, this wasn't a bad idea, so perhaps this was a case where her bad habits turned out to be useful. Queen Lupis's indecisive nature led to her making a defeatist suggestion, but it was better than charging blindly into the enemy's trap.

All the same, Meltina, who stood beside her, shook her head in denial. "It's possible you're right, Your Majesty, and that man is planning something. But it's also possible the enemy lost their nerve upon seeing our army's size and elected to hide inside their walls. Either way, the only answer is to progress while maintaining the status quo."

"We just keep marching for Epirus?"

“Yes. I think that a frontal attack would be our best option.”

Queen Lupis once again settled into a contemplative silence.

“Your Majesty...” Meltina smiled gently. “I understand that you’re ill at ease, and indeed, I didn’t think he would simply cower inside Epirus’s walls until now, but it was a possibility we’d considered. That is why we gathered an army of this size. We just need to corner the enemy little by little. So long as we keep applying pressure, he is sure to break.”

Queen Lupis nodded reluctantly and looked down at the map. She seemed to understand Meltina’s words to an extent, but deep down, she wasn’t fully convinced.

Meltina silently watched her anxious queen. She knew from many years of acquaintance that when Queen Lupis was in this state, anything she might say would have the opposite effect of what she intended.

It might be best if she lets out all the anxiety she’s harboring.

Thankfully, the only ones present were Meltina and Queen Lupis. Better that she let her fear and anxiety explode here than during a war council.

And I can understand why she’s so afraid.

Meltina was also anxious about not knowing what Ryoma Mikoshiba was planning, but though they both had the same fears, there was one thing that set her apart from Queen Lupis: Meltina knew how to restrain her fear.

With her fears right in front of her, she cannot restrain her emotions. She doesn’t have to always keep them restrained, but if she’s constantly tormented by them, it could make her change her plans.

Normally, Meltina wouldn’t even dare to think this about her queen. It was a knight’s and a vassal’s duty to obey their liege’s orders, even when they revised their plans for seemingly no reason. The same could be said for Mikhail Vanash, her counterpart, who was absent from this tent. Their purpose was not to handle the situation appropriately, but instead to answer Queen Lupis’s expectations.

Were this the past, Meltina would merely be an aide to Queen Lupis. She wouldn’t have her own role and responsibilities. Her job had been simply to relay the queen’s wishes to those who would carry out her orders—as a messenger of sorts. But that had only lasted while Lupis was still just a princess, when she wasn’t fully involved with the kingdom’s politics yet. Now, Meltina knew painfully well that nothing was worse than trying to run an administration headed by an indecisive leader. Stabilizing Rhoadseria in its current state required an incredible amount of work and effort. Even so, Meltina had no intention of abandoning Queen Lupis.

I just need to compensate for her flaws, that’s all.

The queen's feelings were quite clear on the northern subjugation, which was why Meltina had worked hard to keep the nobles—who only acted for their greedy desires—satisfied while maintaining a chain of command.

The question is whether anything will happen before we arrive at Epirus.

At present, Meltina and her forces knew very little about the situation in Epirus. Their spies and scouts had reported that hardly any traffic was leaving or entering the city. The gates were sealed shut, and only supply caravans were allowed passage.

What's more, security in the city was tight, so much so that even the most capable of spies had been forced to abandon their attempts to infiltrate the city for information. The size of Epirus's current garrison was still unknown, and nothing had indicated whether the enemy planned to meet them in open combat or try to hide inside their walls.

The only thing Meltina knew for sure was that Epirus's walls flew the Mikoshiba barony's banner of the two-headed silver and gold snake coiled around a sword—which was to say she effectively knew nothing at all. Unfortunately, being uncertain about everything could lead one's heart astray.

That's exactly why we need to stick to our original plan...at least until there's a change in the situation.

It was as suffocating as plunging one's face into a bucket of water. The only way to escape that feeling was to change the original plan, but that would discard their idea of using their superior numbers—two hundred thousand soldiers—to pressure and corner the Mikoshiba barony.

That's an option, of course, but if we cave under the threat of suffocation now and try to pull our head out of the bucket, we'll lose all our momentum. People will start criticizing us.

An army of two hundred thousand was certainly a powerful military force, but commanding such a large group of people could be tricky. The northern subjugation army was made up of the armies of independent nobles who only cared for their own vested interests. They had little conception of serving the queen. So long as the northern subjugation force held the advantage, they'd obey orders, but if the tides of war were to turn against the subjugation, they'd flee for safety at the first chance possible.

Meltina could easily see that if Queen Lupis couldn't maintain the chain of command, the northern subjugation army would fall apart at once. To prevent that, the queen and the rest of the commanders would have to be of one mind.

Suddenly, a noise from outside the tent snapped Meltina out of

her thoughts.

An enemy raid?!

That was the first thought to cross her mind. Queen Lupis seemed to have also noticed the disturbance outside, because she raised her eyes from the map and looked at Meltina with an anxious expression. A second later, Mikhail Vanash stormed into the tent, clearly discomposd. The fact that he neglected to announce his entrance and wait for permission was proof of how urgent the situation was.

Queen Lupis's expression clouded over, and a heavy air hung over the tent.

"Sir Mikhail, what's the matter?!" Meltina asked.

"We just got word from the reconnaissance unit. There's a corps marching our way from Epirus! A force of over fifty thousand soldiers!"

"Fifty thousand? You mean an enemy attack?!"

If those were the Mikoshiba barony's forces, then they would need to prepare to intercept them at once.

It can't be! The barony's army only had twenty to twenty-five thousand soldiers at most! And now they have an army double that size? That's impossible. How did they gather this many soldiers?

Meltina shivered. According to tactical theory, when intercepting an enemy marching into your territory, it was customary to only send out two-thirds of one's total army. They weren't technically within Ryoma Mikoshiba's domain, but since the enemy was defending Epirus, an important defensive position, it was hard to believe they would empty out their citadel's garrison. No sane commander would send all their soldiers out of their stronghold like that.

With that in mind, the fact that the Mikoshiba barony marched out an army of fifty thousand men implied that their total forces had to be at least between seventy-five to eighty thousand troops—which would mean that the barony's army exceeded the ten knight orders under Queen Lupis's direct command. The Mikoshiba barony's army *on its own* exceeded the queen's army in number.

Meltina felt all the color drain from her face.

This is bad, this is bad, this is bad!

The northern subjugation still had the larger army, but since it was made up of individual noble armies, the total size didn't necessarily reflect the army's effective fighting strength. Moreover, they were up against an impressive strategist who could employ any kind of plan against them. The word "retreat" crossed Meltina's mind.

To their surprise, Mikhail shook his head. "No. The scouts say that it's not the Mikoshiba barony's army. If nothing else, it's not an enemy attack."

"Meaning?"

A large group coming from Epirus's direction at a time like this? The only thing Meltina could think of was the Mikoshiba barony's army, which was why she'd panicked, but hearing Mikhail's explanation calmed her down somewhat. That just left the question of who this group was, then.

Survivors from the ten houses of the north? No, that's too big of an army...

If these really were survivors from the ten houses, then they had chosen the worst possible time to show themselves. Besides, if they wanted revenge, they wouldn't decide to appear here at this point in time. If they had any intellect at all, they would lie in wait in Epirus's outskirts and regroup with the northern subjugation there; that would be a much more effective way of complicating things for the Mikoshiba barony. The size of the group was suspicious as well.

What Mikhail said next answered their doubts. "No, they're commoners who lived around Epirus. They rejected the Mikoshiba barony's occupation and are now seeking refuge under Her Majesty, Queen Lupis."

It took a moment for Mikhail's words to fully register in Meltina's mind, but the more she thought of it, the more confused she became.

That night, Lupis Rhoadserians gathered the commanding officers of the northern subjugation army to discuss countermeasures. That said, the only ones in attendance were herself, the supreme commander Helena Steiner, Meltina, and Mikhail.



After Mikhail gave his report, the decision was made to accept the refugees from Epirus. However, not all the wrinkles were ironed out during that war council. The biggest issue to resolve was how the northern subjugation army was going to act while being burdened by the refugees they'd just accepted?

Everyone realized this question was crucial and came with implications on the northern subjugation's overall management. Normally, the nobles would be part of this discussion, but it was obvious that involving them would only complicate the talks. Some nobles argued that the refugees were too much of a burden and disagreed that they should be accepted to begin with. To them, this kind of irregularity was none of their business. Their hearts were driven solely by greed and a thirst for revenge. Consulting them would just set things back; at worst, they wouldn't come up with any solution.

Therefore, Meltina and Mikhail told the nobles that the queen and the supreme commander of the army would decide, yet everyone present knew that they were just buying time.

We had no choice but to accept the refugees, though. Queen Lupis couldn't ignore the voices of her own people crying out for her protection. Still, tactically and strategically speaking, it was a terrible choice. What a problem.

Mikhail Vanash sighed softly as he looked around the tent. Everyone's expressions were dark, making it clear everyone knew the severity of the situation.

It only makes sense. We can't be optimistic with the way things are.

The representative of the Epirus refugees, an old man, had told them that roughly fifty thousand refugees were seeking protection. They hadn't held a roll call, of course, so it was impossible to know their exact size, but given the rate with which they consumed their emergency rations, their numbers were about right.

Needless to say, it was a terrible figure. They made up a fourth of the northern subjugation army's size.

That said, if it is just fifty thousand refugees, we might be able to handle that, but we don't know that for sure.

The problem with accepting refugees who came with nothing but the clothes on their back was that it meant they had to provide them with food and clothing.

They said that when Ryoma Mikoshiba expelled them from Epirus, he gave them several days' worth of food and a single gold coin per family in exchange for their evacuation.

At face value, that sounded like a decent offer. A gold coin, when converted to currency in Ryoma's world, was worth one million yen

and was equivalent to ten thousand copper coins. A single copper was equivalent to a hundred yen, with five coppers being enough to buy a large lunch in O'tormea's capital.

For that amount, these refugees would be able to feed themselves for a long while, making it a luxurious recompense. Most commoners in this world had to balance their food expenses with a single copper coin a day.

If one were to hypothesize that an average family was five to six in number, a single gold coin could keep them fed for months. Despite the fact that they'd rejected the Mikoshiba barony's occupation, Baron Mikoshiba had treated them very fairly, at least on face value. If nothing else, he'd treated them better than any Rhoadserian noble would.

But he did it for malicious purposes.

In peacetime, this would have been a wonderful gesture, as that money could buy them the food and clothing they needed, but northern Rhoadseria was about to become a battlefield, and no merchant, no matter how opportunistic and shrewd, would be brave enough to trade in this region during conflict. The only merchants who would operate near the fighting would be ones with political ties to the armies. Any retail merchants or peddlers would have long since left the region.

Even if some merchants did try to take advantage of the situation, they'd be hard-pressed to obtain goods and produce, since—according to the old refugee representative—most of the surrounding towns and villages had been evacuated. The farming areas that were the backbone of food production had been ravaged. In other words, there was no food to buy in northern Rhoadseria.

And that's why they came to us, begging for help, when we drew closer.

From the refugees' perspective, they had been driven out of their homes because they refused to accept the Mikoshiba barony's occupation. They had chosen loyalty to Rhoadseria over safety, so they'd turned to their kingdom for help.

Therein lay Ryoma Mikoshiba's vicious plan.

I heard he used a similar plan during his war with Count Salzberg, and we stocked up on supplies to counteract the possibility that he'd try the same tactic. Fifty thousand refugees we can handle, but...

The problem was that there couldn't have been just fifty thousand refugees. Mikhail didn't know the total population of northern Rhoadseria—no country in this world had those kinds of statistics about its population—so there was no way he could know the exact number in a situation like this. On the other hand, he did know that the population of Epirus and its surrounding lands had to exceed

several hundred thousand, and most of those people were bound to come to Queen Lupis, asking for help.

Assuming there's a million commoners living in northern Rhoadseria, if half of them rejected the Mikoshiba barony's occupation and were ordered to leave...

That would result in half a million refugees, and the chaos that would ensue from that number was terrifying to imagine. The thought of it made a chill run down Mikhail's back.

That's impossible. Why would he do that in the first place? He went to so much trouble to occupy this land. Why ravage it and make it so he can't collect taxes from it? Is his objective just to completely raze this country to the ground?

The possibility crossed Mikhail's mind for a second, but he soon rejected the idea.

There's no denying that Ryoma Mikoshiba holds a grudge against Queen Lupis, considering everything that's happened between them. Yes, giving a mere commoner like him a noble title is unprecedented, but Queen Lupis rewarded him for his help in the civil war with the undesirable land that is the Wortenia Peninsula. That domain isn't a worthy recompense for his accomplishments.

At the time it was given to him, the Wortenia Peninsula was an abandoned land with no citizens. No one would be happy to receive it as their reward.

And her sending him on the expedition to Xarooda broke their relationship beyond repair.

True, it was Mikhail who'd suggested that Queen Lupis use the Mikoshiba barony for this purpose, and he wasn't going to deny doing it out of hatred for Ryoma, but the fact remained that in the kingdom's unstable state following the civil war, there weren't many other hands they could have played in that situation. This was why Lupis had reluctantly accepted Mikhail's advice and ordered the Mikoshiba barony to join the expedition.

In a sense, she did it only as a surface-level display that she was answering Myest's and Xarooda's expectations that Rhoadseria would participate in the war.

In another sense, she'd only used the Mikoshiba barony as a sacrificial pawn. After all, at the time, the barony had only recently come into possession of Wortenia, and they had been limited in how many soldiers they could send to the expedition.

But Ryoma was able to somehow answer our unreasonable demands, which just made Her Majesty fear him all the more.

Queen Lupis was well aware that the way she treated Ryoma was unjust, and she feared he would come for revenge, which was why she'd tried to have him eliminated. Any vassal who felt their liege was

trying to get rid of them would grow disgruntled and seek a way to survive.

It was inevitable the two would end up clashing.

With that in mind, if all Ryoma wanted was revenge, Mikhail couldn't see him spinning the kind of schemes that would result in such widespread devastation. Mikhail knew Ryoma to be an intellectual and rational man, and it was hard to believe he would do this simply out of a thirst for revenge. If that were Ryoma's goal, this whole sequence of events didn't make sense.

The more he tried to think about it, the less Mikhail could grasp Ryoma's intentions. All the same, there was no point in dwelling on it right now. Whatever Ryoma's plan was, they would have to deal with it, and Mikhail understood that.

It's no good. Whatever we do, we need to decide on a plan.

Mikhail already had his answer, though. All that remained was to hear Helena's opinion. And just as he pondered that, Helena, who had her arms crossed pensively, finally spoke.

"For now, our only option is to reorganize our supply chain to accommodate them," she said bitterly. "We'll be helpless if we end up running out of rations."

Helena herself was aware that her suggestion was far from ideal, but Meltina consented at once.

"Yes, given that we can't deny the refugees, I agree with Lady Helena's idea. We need to rebuild our supply chain. But I do think it would result in us having to cut the soldiers' rations short for the immediate future."

Mikhail came to the same conclusion, meaning everyone but Queen Lupis was in agreement.

Not that we have any other choice. Mikhail nodded briefly, aware that everyone's eyes were on him. *Thankfully, Rhoadseria's primary grain-producing regions are in the south, far from the battlefield, and it's unlikely this war will affect them. So long as we gather supplies from the south and the rest of the country, we could keep even a million refugees fed for a year or two. And in that time, we'll dispose of Ryoma and minimize the damages to the northern regions. It'll be difficult, but this is our best solution.*

This plan wasn't without its share of problems and would strike a painful blow to the kingdom's finances, but if they chose to abandon the refugees, Rhoadseria's public order would spiral out of control.

The kingdom's been unstable as it is in recent years.

Just a few months ago, a large-scale peasant revolt broke out as a result of a conflict between a magistrate and some villagers. Thankfully, the royal knights had been dispatched to swiftly suppress the revolt, and due to Queen Lupis's decision to reduce taxes,

Rhoadseria was able to regain peace.

Even so, people were still disgruntled with the nobles and the kingdom, and if Queen Lupis heeded the nobles' advice and left the refugees to their fate, it could trigger another large-scale revolt from which there would be no going back. The queen had no choice but to accept the refugees and treat them magnanimously under the crown's name. To adopt that course of action, however, they needed to make another decision, and make it fast.

"To do that, someone will have to return to the capital to take command. The question is, who..." Mikhail said.

Everyone present exchanged looks with one another. The answer was self-evident.

I guess I'm the only option here.

The nobles were too obsessed with taking revenge on Ryoma for them to be entrusted with this behind-the-scenes work. If Queen Lupis gave the order, any noble would be compelled to obey, albeit reluctantly, but they would handle things for appearance's sake only and would be sloppy and negligent about it. At worst, they'd even smuggle supplies away to line their pockets.

For the same reasons, the bureaucrats who remained in the capital couldn't be counted on to do this. They were reliable when it came to their official duties, but without someone to supervise them, they could end up scheming.

As the commander of the northern subjugation army, Queen Lupis couldn't leave the battlefield. Besides, if she did return to the capital, she wouldn't be able to rebuild the supply lines while keeping an eye out on the nobles and the bureaucrats.

That narrowed the list of possible candidates to Helena, Meltina, or Mikhail.

Lady Helena is the supreme commander of our armies. Her returning would definitely have a ripple effect. In addition...

Queen Lupis didn't fully trust Helena, and neither did Mikhail nor Meltina. Helena had once tried to shift to Ryoma's side, and she only remained on Lupis's side thanks to Sudou's maneuvering. However, even though she eventually chose not to betray Queen Lupis, the fact that she'd considered it made her untrustworthy.

Perhaps placing her in charge of our armies was a bad idea.

Normally, assigning someone who could betray you to command your armies would be an act of madness, but they had still elected to do so because her being the commander would influence the army's morale.

I hate to admit it, but her name as Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War gives her influence and reputation that we can't ignore over both Rhoadseria and the surrounding countries.

A good part of the reason that many of the nobles obeyed Helena's orders was due to that reputation. Then, if Helena couldn't be counted on, the only remaining options were Mikhail and Meltina, Queen Lupis's trusted aides.

But it's clear that if Meltina were to return, Her Majesty would be anxious and unstable.

Queen Lupis trusted Mikhail, certainly, but not having an aide of the same gender with her on the battlefield would have a debilitating effect on her mental state.

Plus, Meltina isn't well suited for this kind of work, and she doesn't get along with that man whatsoever. I don't get along with Sudou well either, but I'm better at containing myself.

The face of that middle-aged man and his mocking smile flashed in Mikhail's mind.

I'd rather not rely on him for help, but given the situation...

They were in a partnership with him now, but that didn't mean they were truly friends, or even allies for that matter. Even now, Mikhail didn't trust Akitake Sudou, but he did hold Sudou's talent for negotiation and mediation in high regard.

Akitake Sudou had originally been an aide to Princess Radine, who was once their enemy, and despite that, he was able to establish a position for himself in the court. Through that, he developed a partnership with Mikhail, an aide to his enemy. Whatever goals Sudou had in mind, his talents were indispensable in times of emergency like this.

All things considered, Mikhail was the only one who could return to the capital now. The question now was who would be the one to say it out loud.

As everyone exchanged awkward looks, Mikhail slowly said, "I will return to the capital, then."

"Are you sure?" Queen Lupis asked, her face awash with relief and guilt. "Mikhail, if you return to the capital now..."

She knew that Mikhail approached this war with a great deal of ambition and desire to contribute. The northern subjugation held special significance to Mikhail. During the civil war, his impatience had gotten him captured, which was a blot on his good name. This war was Mikhail's chance to gain the kind of merit that would wash away this shame.

But that's just my own personal prestige.

Mikhail nodded proudly, and Helena nodded back. The other three knew he was the only realistic option.

With that decided, the remaining topic at hand was the upcoming siege battle against Epirus.

But we already have the answer to that too.

After rejecting Ryoma's occupation, the refugees sought nothing more than to return home. People felt an affinity toward the land they were born in, and now they had hope in the form of the vast northern subjugation army. Queen Lupis couldn't ignore their demands, and even if she could, doing so would be meaningless.

After all, the nobles who made up the army were all clamoring to take revenge on Ryoma, and with the refugees' requests on top of that, they *had* to besiege Epirus, even if it meant resorting to forceful means to do it. In the end, Queen Lupis could decide to lay siege to the city of her own will or do so because of outside pressure.

Mikhail sighed. *We have no choice but to attack Epirus as planned, even if it means braving some risks.*

Originally, the northern subjugation army should have had an overwhelming advantage, or at the very least, they'd prepared for the war well enough to make that claim. Be that as it may, Mikhail could tell that it would take no time at all for their preparations to fall apart, but he also knew he couldn't very well say that out loud.

"Then that just leaves the siege of Epirus," Meltina stated. "Are we still going to begin on the appointed date?"

The other three fell silent. Everyone present had an ominous premonition about the siege. That creeping fear had no concrete basis, but their intuition still warned them. If they'd had any concrete reasons to object, they'd have spoken up, but since they didn't, silence hung over them all.

It's obvious why, though. There's no chance that man doesn't have some sort of plan. We all know that.

The issue was that they didn't know what kind of plan Ryoma had. Fundamentally speaking, there were many strategies used in a siege, divided between the attacking side and the defending side—mole tactics with the attackers burrowing under the walls, an enemy general betraying his side to open the gates, surrounding a castle so as to starve it out. Across history and all over the world, many tactics were used in siege battles. There were also siege weapons, like battering rams, to consider. All of these things were used even in this world, one with the power of thaumaturgy. Needless to say, Lupis's army came equipped with siege weapons.

Meanwhile, the defending side holed up inside the walls typically resorted to tactics based around stalling for time until reinforcements arrived. Of course, there were all sorts of methods a besieged army could take to last longer. However, the primary objective of a defending army was not to defeat the attacking army, but to outlast it until it was forced to retreat. That meant that Ryoma's and his allies were rather limited in what they could do while holed behind Epirus's walls.

After all, no noble in Rhoadseria would send soldiers to help them. To be exact, aristocrats who were affiliated with the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph, who were now part of the Mikoshiba barony, were a possibility, but most of those nobles had already had their territories revoked and had to flee to the Wortenia Peninsula with their families.

In addition, we sent messengers to Xarooda and Myest and signed pacts of noninterference with them. There's no telling if they're scheming behind the scenes, but formally speaking, they shouldn't be sending any reinforcements to Ryoma Mikoshiba. That just leaves the Kingdom of Helnesgoula, but they don't share a border with us. If they were to interfere, they'd have to do it through a sea route. But our spies report that there are building tensions at the O'tormea-Qwiltantia border. Would they really risk a voyage to send him reinforcements under those conditions?

The more he thought about it, the less likely it seemed any reinforcements were marching to help the Mikoshiba barony.

But if that's the case, I have no idea what he's planning.

Mikhail Vanash's intellect was unable to answer that question. All he could do was go around in circles, with each question only leading to more questions. Due to that, their discussions about besieging Epirus lasted all night long.

But in a few days' time, the four of them would come to realize that all their discussions were for nothing.

A few days had passed since Queen Lupis accepted the refugees. The northern subjugation army had marched its troops to a spot two kilometers away from Epirus. It was an area dotted with low, sloping hills on Epirus's outskirts.

Sitting on her horse, Helena looked at Epirus's imposing walls, her mind brooding.

Knowing that boy, I expected him to use the confusion the refugees caused by joining us to launch a surprise attack, but nothing happened.

She was torn between relief that her expectations had been proven wrong and dread at having failed to read Ryoma. Either way, the northern subjugation army was about to strike at its first major objective.

Thanks to Meltina and her subordinates' efforts, we were able to accept the refugees relatively quickly, but the fact it went so smoothly is what worries me.

Immediately after the decision to accept the refugees was made, the nobles' objections had caused some temporary confusion in the army, and the soldiers were upset to learn that their rations would be reduced to accommodate the newcomers. The soldiers' discontent didn't come as a surprise, as they risked their lives on the field of

battle, but having smaller portions for the sake of noncombatants struck them as unacceptable.

Helena had initially believed that this was Ryoma's plan.

He was hoping to stall us with this. It makes sense strategically. It would have been a viable way to make an opening for a surprise attack too.

Given the numerical disadvantage, the Mikoshiha barony couldn't hope to challenge the northern subjugation army in open combat.

If they do try, it will be for one of two reasons. He would either do it for lack of any other choice, hoping to somehow turn the tables on us, or he would do it because he's confident he'd win.

In that regard, accepting the refugees was a dangerous choice, but Meltina had handled the situation while aware of this. She had explained to the soldiers that the refugees were loyal Rhoadserian citizens who had rejected the Mikoshiha barony's rule.

Mikhail's decision to set up a reservation to house the refugees also turned out to be a good idea. Bringing noncombatants along with their army to war would have been risky, and giving the refugees shelter did help improve their emotional state.

At worst, accepting the refugees could have taken us between ten to fourteen days.

The fact that they had accomplished this in a mere few days was a major achievement. It was likely that Ryoma hadn't expected them to handle the situation that quickly.

I knew those two had matured, yes, but...

Meeting Ryoma had spurred growth in both Meltina and Mikhail. The former grew ashamed of her ignorance, while the latter grew beyond his strict ideals of chivalry, allowing them both to approach situations from new angles. Thanks to that, they were able to function as effective aides to Queen Lupis.

But Helena was only aware of this because she had engaged with them directly, and even she hadn't expected that the two would become so dependable. In which case, since Ryoma hadn't seen their growth, he shouldn't have expected it.

But did he really just miss his chance to launch a surprise attack?

Given Queen Lupis's compassionate nature, using weak people like refugees as a weapon to corner his enemies was an effective play on Ryoma's behalf, but it wasn't without its risks. Even if these commoners did reject his occupation, outright expelling them from their homes would lessen his tax revenue. This plan would cost him a hefty price, and it was hard to believe that Ryoma didn't already know that. For that reason, Helena couldn't guess at how far Ryoma's plan extended.

Does this mean he did it to achieve something else?

That doubt gnawed at Helena, but she didn't have the time to crack that riddle. Besides, thinking about it now wouldn't help.

That's the reconnaissance unit we sent to scout out the situation in Epirus. They look discomposd.

Helena narrowed her eyes and spotted a group approaching from afar, their steeds kicking up a cloud of dust. Her intuition whispered to her that their arrival would mark a turning point, the start of an opportunity that would greatly change the outcome of this battle.

Chapter 3: The Empty Fort Scheme

An impromptu war council was called to receive the scout unit's report, and all the leaders of the northern subjugation gathered in the central tent.

"The Mikoshiba barony's soldiers aren't inside Epirus?! That... How can that be?!" Queen Lupis cried in disbelief. Her voice was full of suspicion and surprise.

As the commander of the scout unit knelt before her, Queen Lupis looked at him dubiously. Meltina and the other nobles nearby, like Count Eisenbach, reacted much the same. Some of them even looked at the captain with scorn.

Seeing this, Helena softly sighed. *I doubt he's lying, but this report really is hard to believe.*

The report stated that the citadel city of Epirus was completely empty of both the Mikoshiba barony's soldiers and its tens of thousands of residents. This news was understandably difficult to swallow.

But why would the captain lie?

If this captain was in cahoots with the Mikoshiba barony and gave a false report to lure the northern subjugation army into a trap, they would have come up with a more convincing lie.

Whether we can believe him is another matter, though.

From the captain's perspective, this must have felt like a terribly unreasonable situation. After having been charged with the dangerous task of investigating Epirus, he returned from his task only to have the legitimacy of his report called into question. One couldn't fault him for being angry at this unreasonable treatment.

Still, the citadel city was an indispensable defensive position to retain control over northern Rhoadseria. The thought of the Mikoshiba barony discarding this fortification without so much as a single fight was unthinkable. It was clear, however, that doubting the report's validity would get them nowhere.

In which case, our only option is to send another scout unit to check.

This was the best response if they truly doubted the report.

If we do send another and find out the report is false, that's fine. If they lied on purpose, they will simply be put through a court-martial and executed. If they got the situation wrong through some ploy Ryoma cooked up, they can't quite be faulted. But...what if their report is actually true?

Normally, if they found the city empty, their next logical step would be to occupy it. Whatever trap might be lying in wait for them, Epirus was still a key target for the northern subjugation army.

But would that really be the right choice?

No one present could answer that question.

“For now, let’s send out another scout unit to confirm the report, and we’ll decide how to act going forward once we’ve done that,” Meltina suggested.

Knowing that they were getting nowhere with this, the others all reluctantly agreed. Only Helena kept her arms crossed as she wordlessly considered Ryoma’s plan, believing this was the best thing she could do at the moment.

A few hours later, the second scout unit reported back, and as Helena had suspected would happen, the northern subjugation army moved in to occupy Epirus the following morning. Unfortunately, Helena, suppressed by the voices of greedy fools, did not stop this—for she didn’t know it would be the beginning of a new tragedy.

The following day, Helena stood atop a small hill, watching as the northern subjugation army passed through the gates into Epirus’s walls. Standing beside her were Queen Lupis and Meltina, their expressions a mix of expectation and unease. Meltina in particular looked tense, and even Helena could tell she was on tenterhooks. Her hands were clasped together and trembling slightly.

“Were we just being overly cautious?” Meltina muttered.

Helena shrugged. “It’s hard to say at this point. But whichever way things go, I do think you did all that you could.”

On the surface, everything seemed to be going well, but all three women questioned how much they could believe this situation. Meltina was the one who’d proposed they occupy Epirus, and although it was Queen Lupis who had finalized the decision, Meltina still wavered, wondering if her judgment was correct.



She doesn't have faith in her own decision. I can understand that. We were shocked when we heard that they left their supplies and weapons behind when they evacuated the city. It almost feels too good to be true.

The report from the second scout unit had come as a major surprise to Helena. As the first report had stated, the Mikoshiba barony's army wasn't stationed within Epirus. All the foodstuff and valuables in storefronts and civilian homes were left as is, and warehouses all over the city were discovered to house caches of military supplies.

With the northern subjugation army marching on them, it was possible the Mikoshiba barony's army chose to evacuate the city posthaste, and there were signs that they'd taken some supplies with them, which implied the army had abandoned Epirus in a hurry.

The situation did suggest this was the plausible conclusion, and Helena had no physical proof to suggest this was a trap. Even so, she commanded this army, so she had to assume something was amiss and adopt countermeasures in case of this contingency. Meltina would have acted the same, and so would Mikhail, who had returned to the capital to build a new supply network.

Sadly, one's judgment wasn't always driven by rationality. When it was driven by greed, people made painfully foolish choices sometimes.

Given the situation, I can see why they'd jump at the first sight of prey.

The northern subjugation army was made up of many nobles, but most of them were barons and viscounts. While they were low-ranking compared to other nobles, the commoners still saw them as part of the lofty ruling class.

However, just as the pantheons of the gods had hierarchies, so too did the Rhoadserian aristocracy. Such nobles were ranked the lowest of all aristocrats, and their domains were smaller. Barons were inferior to viscounts, who themselves were inferior to counts. The higher one's rank was, the larger their domain. And the size of a domain was typically in direct proportion to its tax yield.

This meant that low-ranking nobles were by no means as wealthy as the commoners thought. Ryoma Mikoshiba was a baron who'd been given the Wortenia Peninsula, a land large enough to be considered a duke's domain, and Viscount Gelhart's domain was very financially prosperous despite his demotion, but those were exceptions. Most barons only ruled a handful of rural villages, and the tax yield of such lands was small.

Nobles needed money to fund their armies and internal affairs, and also maintain their dignity and appearance as nobles, so they were always short on coin. For those with lesser titles, war was a

painful duty, but at the same time, it was an opportunity to escape their financial woes.

It feels contradictory.

Normally, war was nothing but a major expenditure. Drafting commoners into levies was indeed cheaper than hiring mercenaries and soldiers of fortune, but they still needed supplies and weapons to fight. War was fundamentally a money sink instead of a lucrative venture.

That was only a superficial approach to the nature of war, though. For instance, when fighting the people of another country, captives were sold off as slaves for large sums of money, a practice that was accepted as the natural privilege of those who won. In addition, pillaging enemy countries was an easy source of money.

If one intended to occupy the country, though, pillaging was terrible. Ravaging the land you went to such great lengths to conquer would impact your income in the long run. On the other hand, this only concerned the noble who ended up receiving the raided land, and only counts and dukes were typically given this honor.

Low-ranking nobles have fewer troops compared to high-ranking ones, so unless they're extremely talented in commanding armies, it's not likely they'll contribute more than a count or duke.

It was the very image of a society where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, so to many low-ranking nobles, the immediate reward of being able to pillage villages or cities was much more lucrative in the immediate sense than whatever vague rewards they might receive from the country's sovereign.

These nobles could see that Epirus was a veritable mountain of treasure waiting to be plundered, so they had no semblance of restraint as they scrambled to get their share. They ravenously asked Queen Lupis and the other commanding officers for permission to rush the city.

The sight Helena was watching right now was the outcome of that. Thirty thousand men, roughly fifteen percent of the northern subjugation army, were marching into Epirus. That was a considerable number of troops.

We were at least able to limit how many nobles entered the city under the condition that the loot they pillage will be split equally tomorrow.

They knew there was a chance Mikoshiba barony had set traps, but the nobles ignored their warning. Therefore, Helena only had one strategy to employ—to use those who ignored her warnings as a canary in the coal mine. And the canary's fate in this scenario was sealed.

Of course, Helena intended to do what was possible to help them. She divided the remaining units in four and stationed them around the

city to serve as reinforcements in case something happened. Still, Helena's anxiety lingered on.

All that's left is to pray they'll be fine.

Nonetheless, Helena knew this was hypocritical of her. Even if they had volunteered to do so, it was she, as commander of this army, that possibly sent them to their deaths. Even so, her hope that they would emerge unscathed was genuine. As greedy as the nobles were, they were still comrades flying her banner, and she did not wish for their deaths.

Despite Helena's wishes, the reaper's scythe was already swooping toward the northern subjugation army's neck.



The citadel city of Epirus was the domain of the Salzberg county and the lynchpin of their position as leader of the ten houses of the north. As the center of northern Rhoadseria, it was one of the country's oldest and most flourishing cities, as well as a fearsome bulwark that had repelled multiple invasions.

Yet, Ryoma Mikoshiba's war with Count Salzberg had jeopardized Epirus's status as an impregnable fortification, and on this day, invaders once again entered the city walls with the intent of pillaging its riches.

The sun was dipping behind the horizon, casting a reddish glow over the land. It looked as if the world was burning in flickering fire, and in a sense, perhaps it was. It was currently burning with the fires of greed.

Half a day has passed since the northern subjugation army had begun occupying Epirus that morning, and forty percent of the city had been searched. Most of the efforts were focused on Count Salzberg's estates, as well as the estates and storefronts of merchants who had managed the city's finances for many years, such as the Mystel and Rafael companies. There were still some sectors that needed to be checked, like the refugee sectors built by the walls, but one could very well say the city was safe.

Not that the soldiers inside Epirus thought that they were inspecting the city to ensure it was safe. Helena did warn them about the possibility of a trap, so at first the soldiers were wary of a possible raid, but after half a day, they hadn't run into anyone, animal or human alike, to say nothing of an enemy soldier. They had searched the larger buildings too, where soldiers could be hiding, but had found nothing. If the Mikoshiba barony soldiers were still hiding somewhere, their numbers were small—maybe a few hundred. On the off chance that they were spread out, there were at most two or three thousand of them.

Of course, even if they only had a total of a few thousand troops, that number could still be a potential threat. However, the garrison that now occupied Epirus was a total of thirty thousand troops—over ten times that size. The difference was too great for any army to overcome. Plus, the rest of the northern subjugation army was still on guard outside the wall. Normally, their victory in this battle would have seemed like a forgone conclusion.

Thanks to that, the soldiers who were initially wary of an enemy attack grew confident that they'd won and therefore began neglecting their original roles, instead busying themselves with their secondary goal. It wasn't just the soldiers carrying out the work either; even the officers and the nobles leading them only cared about pillaging their own mountains of treasure.

"Oooh, wow. Now this is some fine craftsmanship. I'd bet it's worth at least three gold."

One soldier who burst into an empty civilian room raised his voice gleefully as he took a valuable out of a drawer. The soldiers around him cursed at him in envy.

"What are you, daft?" Another soldier called out, hoping to disparage the value of his colleague's discovery. "It's worth five silvers at most!"

"This hairpin! It's got amber in it! I wasn't expecting much from such a seedy house, but this here is a catch!"

"I'd say! I feel bad about having to share with the men keeping watch outside, but I'll be fine if I can keep this!"

Their vulgar laughter echoed through Epirus's streets. To them, this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance at wealth. Most household assets had been left behind, along with food and other luxuries like cigarettes and alcohol.

Not all of this would go directly into these pillagers' pockets, though. At Helena's instructions, half of the precious metals would be left outside the city, while the rest of the goods would be split up equally among the units. All the same, with so much loot, even just half of the yield would be enough to sate their greed. They could use this gold for booze, or women, or both, but either way, they would be able to experience luxuries a commoner was unlikely to ever know in his entire life. That emotion filled them with elation, so they vanished into Epirus's buildings, seeking further riches.

The soldiers left behind decided to start a feast in the streets. Sitting on a table were bottles of alcohol, as well as bacon and cheese, all probably pilfered from kitchens. The soldiers gleefully drank straight from the bottle and feasted on the cheese like they were drunk on victory.

They were unaware of the masked figures who silently watched

their festivities from afar, hidden in a building's attic.

"Lady Sakuya. As expected, they're greedily scavenging the city. From the looks of things, they'll be drinking the night away," one figure said, gazing at the goings-on beneath them through a peephole.

Sakuya nodded. "Just as Lord Ryoma predicted."

With this, things should go as planned.

The mission Ryoma had entrusted to Sakuya Igasaki was larger in scale than anything she had ever experienced. 130 skilled Igasaki ninjas spread out across the capital were to eliminate tens of thousands of soldiers—a ploy to turn the tables dramatically.

As the leader charged with this mission's success, Sakuya was under a great deal of pressure. She'd prepared enough to be able to confidently say they were ready, but she couldn't deny the possibility of failure remained high. The Igasaki ninjas had to remain hidden as they waited for the right chance.



Hours ticked by, and finally the time came as the people downstairs began their foolish celebration.

Clouds hung over the moon, casting the earth into darkness. It was a pitch black night, with only the occasional stray ray of pale moonlight shining through the clouds to join the flickering of what few torches shone around Epirus.

“The time is now.”

Sakuya swept her hand horizontally through the air. At this gesture, all the shadowy figures around her vanished at once, scattering into the city’s streets. Some thirty minutes later, a bright flash suddenly erupted from Count Salzberg’s estate at the heart of the city, followed by a thundering rumble that shook the dark night. Then a shock wave that rattled the very ground around Epirus struck the northern subjugation army.

Following that, in what seemed like a chain reaction, a series of explosions ran along the walls of the city, their shock waves and thundering rumbles startling a soldier that was celebrating his fortune and victory just moments ago and forcing him to bolt out of the house he was pillaging.

The sight that greeted him was that of the citadel city engulfed in a burning inferno. All the civilian homes standing along the streets were on fire, flames billowing from their windows and spewing out black smoke. Red sparks and white ashes flitted down like snow.

It was a picture of hell.

“What...is this...?”

Such a sight should not have been possible. True, if someone had knocked down a candlestick in a drunken stupor, it could have started a fire, but even if someone had done that, the fire would have consumed a single house. If the fire spread, it wouldn’t reach every single building in the area. Even if attempts to put it out failed, it would still take a while for the blaze to spread this far.

Yet this impossible scene was playing out before the soldier’s eyes. He felt the heat against his skin, forcibly affirming that this could not have been a dream. Overwhelmed by the sight, the soldier could only watch in amazement and crumble to his knees.

Not all the soldiers were crushed by this sight, of course. Some were trying to fight off the inferno, but their efforts were in vain.

“We have to get water!” One soldier hurried to the well, hoping to scoop up water to extinguish the flames, but curses and insults were hurled his way as he did.

“Are you stupid?! Look at this fire! You think splashing some water’s going to help with this?! Hurry up and get out of the city!”

“He’s right, we have to get out of here!”

“You’re the stupid ones!” the man hurrying to the well retorted. “Do you have any idea how far we are from the gates?! We’ll just end up catching fire and burning to death!”

The soldiers shouting at him fell silent, unable to argue back. Exchanges like this could be heard all over the city, and in some of them, the soldiers were foolish enough to get into actual verbal arguments despite the state of emergency.

None of them knew whether they should flee or put out the fire. Scooping up water from a well wouldn’t be enough to extinguish a fire this large, but with all the buildings on fire, getting to the city gates would be a challenge.

There was no correct answer in this situation, but at the same time, if they didn’t reach the correct answer, they could very well burn to death. Because of that, everyone was shocked in the face of this situation, going every which way in the hopes of finding their way out, not realizing they were wasting precious time in doing so.

Those foolish soldiers would meet only one end.

One by one, the soldiers began to collapse, choking on the smoke, and perished alongside the riches they had craved so much, in the embrace of the flames.



“Looks like it went well. With this, the thirty thousand northern subjugation soldiers that entered Epirus have been eradicated.”

Fire and smoke enveloped the citadel city. Standing atop the ramparts surrounding the city, Sakuya whispered in satisfaction as she watched the inferno below. She was elated.

But this firepower is terrifying. I didn’t think the explosives Nelcius gave us would produce such intense fire.

When Ryoma came up with this plan and sought a way to burn down Epirus rapidly, the dark elf chief Nelcius had proposed a certain concoction—a liquid known as the Fire Drake’s Breath. Normally, it was an unassuming red liquid. It was harmless to the human body, and one could even drink it with no adverse effects, but when mixed with small amounts of saltpeter and sulfur, the fluid’s properties changed.

The resulting concoction became extremely volatile, violently igniting when exposed to fire. It was a valuable fluid, which only the dark elven masters of endowed thaumaturgy were capable of creating. It was similar to nitroglycerin or gasoline in nature. The method of its creation was a guarded dark elf secret, and it could not be produced in large amounts.

The dark elves of the Wortenia Peninsula created the Fire Drake’s Breath to combat the menacing monsters and beasts prowling in the

area, meaning they relied on it for survival.

Nelcius had provided twenty wagons' worth of this precious concoction.

The Mikoshiba barony's survival was linked to the future of the dark elves living in the peninsula, but even with that in mind, this had no doubt been a difficult decision. Nelcius's help was what allowed the Mikoshiba barony to embark on this plan against Epirus.

The "empty fort scheme," as the lord called it.

Sakuya recalled this name coming up in Ryoma's explanation of the plan. This was different from the empty fort stratagem from the thirty-six ancient Chinese strategies. The original stratagem was a piece of psychological warfare based on intentionally showing weakness to the enemy to make them suspect a trap and force the enemy to retreat—like a bluff in a game of poker.

In one famous adaptation of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Zhuge Liang was forced to hide in his castle after Sima Yi of the Kingdom of Wei had defeated him. He left his gates open and played a stringed instrument. His attempt to lure the armies of Wei into his castle made Sima Yi fear a trap and retreat.

Ryoma's plan wasn't to drive his enemies into retreat, however, but rather to slaughter the enemy soldiers, so he had to create a situation where even if the enemy feared the possibility of a trap, they would have no choice but to charge in.

All of his plans are part of the same flow.

In board games like shogi or chess, whenever players moved a piece, they always thought several turns ahead. The way Ryoma's mind operated was much the same.

After all, he had Nelcius prepare this.

Sakuya glanced back, at the oblong, metallic birdlike object behind her, which was covered by a cloth. It was likely designed to be difficult to spot in the night, because not just the cloth but even its metallic skeleton were dyed black.



Anyone summoned from Rearth would recognize this as a hang glider, but that wasn't entirely true, because this one had the dark elves' endowed thaumaturgy applied to it—a wind thaumaturgical seal.

“Let's go!” Sakuya called out, looking around at her subordinates.

She affixed her body to the device using a rope and broke into a sprint. Running ten meters or so along the ramparts, she jumped off the high walls and threw herself into the air. The next second, Sakuya's chakras began revolving, feeding prana to the thaumaturgical seal applied to the glider.

Sakuya felt a sense of weightlessness as her body was freed from gravity's hold. The contraption moved according to her wheel, steering her across the sky. At that moment, a thick cloud obstructing the sky parted, revealing the pale glass moon. Her visage was like that of a black bird soaring across the night sky, guided by moonlight.

With the moonlight shining over them, several of the northern subjugation army's soldiers spotted Sakuya and her party. They brought out bows and began shooting arrows, hoping to shoot them down, but the wind thaumaturgy allowed the gliders to fly high, beyond the reach of any arrow.

The bows can't reach us at this altitude.

In this world, people flying through the sky was still the stuff of myths and legends. Due to the contraption's mana consumption, they could only manage short-distance flights, but nothing could be more effective at breaking through the enemy's encirclement.

Hee hee... Wasted effort...

As Sakuya soared, Epirus burning beneath her, she relished her brief journey through the sky. She did not yet know that Helena—who had guessed their plan when she saw the fires—was riding with the northern subjugation army to apprehend Sakuya and her unit.



A few hours later, the pursuers arrived directly behind Sakuya. To shake off their pursuit, the Igasaki ninjas raced through the dark, heading northeast, their faces streaked with alarm. The hang gliders had helped them cover much necessary distance, but even with the aid of martial thaumaturgy hastening their steps, Sakuya and her party were now on foot.

Meanwhile, the unit pursuing them was made up entirely of cavalry, and they were on horseback. Had she only needed to travel a short distance, Sakuya might have been able to shake them off, but a human couldn't outrun a horse over long distances. It was only a matter of time before the enemy caught up.

And we can't let the enemy do that. As much as I hate to do this, we haven't much of a choice.

The fact that one of her subordinates in the back of the line had noticed the cloud of dust their pursuers had kicked up was nothing short of a stroke of luck. It was the only way they had been able to detect them. They'd increased the velocity of the hang gliders to escape their pursuers, but that had resulted in them consuming much more mana than they'd accounted for, forcing them to land before planned and discard the gliders. Still, this was preferable to the enemy catching them and taking away their secret weapon.

They used the Fire Drake's Breath they carried to dispose of the now useless hang gliders. After lamenting her imprudence, Sakuya swiftly ordered her subordinates to flee. Her heart was full of regret, for in her joy at seeing the plan succeed, she had become reckless.

What will I tell the lord? The thought clenched around Sakuya's heart like a fist.

After all, the hang gliders were endowed with dark elves' techniques, making them too valuable for mere coin to replace them. Moreover, mastering their use took a great deal of time, and producing one required ingredients collected from monsters native to Wortenia. Even if the enemy did take the gliders, they wouldn't immediately be a threat. In this regard, they wouldn't have needed to waste what precious little Fire Drake's Breath they had to dispose of them.

However, they couldn't risk the possibility of the enemy learning of the Mikoshiba barony's technology. Such information had to be kept as secret as possible, and these secrets were, at times, worth more than money or human life. Losing an item wasn't as big of a blow, because more could be bought or made, but once that information leaked to the enemy, there was no hiding it again.

Considering that, Sakuya's choice to burn the gliders had been correct, but had she been more wary of the situation, this outcome could have been avoided altogether. The guilt of that realization weighed on her, but before long, the time to regret would come to an end.

Sakuya could hear the sound of horses' hooves from behind. Ahead of them was a dense forest—the wooded area leading to the Tilt Mountains and the entrance to the Wortenia Peninsula. If they could get there, their odds of escaping would increase somewhat.

Unfortunately, Sakuya knew that the enemy would catch up to them before they could reach it. What's more, a bright light shining from behind the ninjas was illuminating Sakuya and her men as they tried to blend in the dark. The pursuing knights had likely activated some kind of thaumaturgical tool meant for illumination.

Exposed to a light much brighter than that of a torch, the Igasaki ninjas stopped in their tracks. Then the next instant, as Sakuya and the ninjas stood frozen, a shower of arrows rained down on them.

“Lady Sakuya!”

One of the shadows following Sakuya jumped over her, shielding her with his back. The momentum of his push sent them both tumbling to the ground as a groan of agony leaked from his throat. Sakuya gritted her teeth, feeling intense pain shoot through her right thigh, and swiftly drew the kodachi sheathed at her waist.

Thankfully, she hadn’t been hit in any vital areas due to the ninja protecting her. She silently mourned the subordinate who’d saved her life by taking an arrow to the head and surveyed the situation around her.

Six of us have died. A few are still alive, but...there’s no slipping away from this.

Having been shot through the thigh, Sakuya couldn’t run any longer.

This is as far as we go... In which case!

Her cold outlook, fostered by her ninja training, denied the possibility of her surviving this, but Sakuya would impede her enemy as much as possible before she died.

Perhaps sensing Sakuya’s resolve, the pursuers carrying the light magic tool revealed themselves from the darkness. The commander of their unit showed herself, took off her helmet, and stood in front of Sakuya.

“I thought I recognized you...”

Sakuya looked up and glared at the commander.

“Helena Steiner... So it was you?” she said, her expression bitter. She gripped the kodachi behind her back, prepared to attack Helena at the first sign of weakness.

Helena had already guessed Sakuya’s plan. “It won’t work, so don’t bother.” She shrugged. “Skilled as you may be, you won’t be able to take me with those injuries.”

Helena was right. Sakuya was among the most skilled members of the Igasaki clan, and her martial arts prowess was greater than that of the average knight, but as a ninja, her expertise was in stealth and surprise attacks. By contrast, Helena was an actual knight, her expertise being in fighting opponents head-on. One could argue over which woman was stronger, but so long as they both could see each other, Helena had the advantage.

“So, are you going to torture me for information?” Sakuya asked.

Helena shook her head wryly. “I wouldn’t waste my time like that. You might believe you’ll have a chance to escape if I take you prisoner, but I know you’re not the kind of person to betray Ryoma.”

Sakuya's eyes widened in surprise, and Helena directed a tired smile at her.

"I know. You're like me, after all."

These emotions were shared by those who'd been charmed by Ryoma Mikoshiba's vision. Because of that, Helena knew that Sakuya would never betray him.

Helena unsheathed her sword, seemingly intent on dispatching Sakuya personally. "I will see you die right here..."

With that soft whisper, Helena held her sword aloft.

Milord, forgive me, for I have failed you.



Sakuya's heart pounded with regret and resignation. Her ninja instincts, which she'd fostered since infancy, screamed at her, spurring her to strike at the enemy one last time. However...

Helena did not swing her sword down.

"Sakuya! Get back!" a man called from the woods.

Sakuya hopped back on sheer reflex. The sudden, excessive movement made the nerves in her thigh, still pierced by the arrow, explode in pain, but that reflex was what decided the outcome.

The next second, a single spear tore through the dark, hurtling toward Helena. The venerated knight shielded herself with her sword, blocking the attack and withstanding its impact. The earsplitting clatter of steel clashing with steel rang out, and sparks sprayed through the air. Helena's face contorted in anger; the intruder had snatched this prized chance from her.

Sheathing her sword, Helena looked up at the tall young man that stepped out of the trees. "I will admit I'm shocked. I never expected to meet you here," she said as if she were joyfully reuniting with an old friend.

The owner of the voice, Ryoma, shrugged at her, but contrary to his seemingly casual attitude, he was fully alert of his surroundings. As proof, he moved Sakuya to stand behind him, shielding her. Once he confirmed she was safe, he then slowly bowed his head to Helena.



They now met as enemies, yet an invisible bond lingered between them. The two knights standing behind Helena didn't interrupt their conversation either.

"It's been some time," Ryoma said.

"Yes, it has. But what are you doing here?" Helena asked. As head of the Mikoshiba barony, Ryoma had no need to be present.

Ryoma answered with a sarcastic smile. "I could ask you the same thing."

"Yes, I suppose that's true."

Helena chuckled, as if she'd just recalled her position, but after that moment of levity, her eyes filled with bloodlust. She swiftly raised her right hand. At her signal, the knights around her dismounted their horses and drew their swords at once. The knights behind her nocked their arrows, aiming at Ryoma.

Ryoma met Helena's signal with one of his own. He thrust his fist toward the sky, and a party clad in black emerged from the woods, bows drawn. Leading the group was Sakuya's grandfather, Gennou Igasaki. He'd likely deployed the Igasaki clan to rescue his granddaughter.

"I see. Yes, you wouldn't do something carelessly," Helena said.

"I could say the same to you." Ryoma cocked his head. "So what now? Are we going to fight? Personally, I'd prefer to take my wounded subordinate back to be treated. I'd appreciate it if you'd allow us to retreat, out of respect for our standing friendship."

On the surface, his words lacked tenacity. Claiming that he'd "appreciate it" made it sound like he was seeking a compromise. The truth, however, was quite the opposite of that. His words were full of absolute, unwavering confidence.

Helena shrugged at Ryoma. "Yes... Very well, then." She turned on her heels, then looked at Ryoma over her shoulder. "But that's one favor you owe me. Remember that."

She waved her right hand gently, signaling her subordinates to follow.

"Yes, I owe you one," Ryoma said with a smile. "I won't forget it. But I doubt it'll be long before I return it. Do look forward to it."

Ryoma picked up Sakuya, who was kneeling beside him, and walked away.

"Milord, why did you come here?" Sakuya whispered as Ryoma carried her through the woods.

Her face was flushed with shame that her respected lord was carrying her like a bride, but because of the nature of her wound, she didn't demand to be put down.

“Well, let’s just say I had a bad feeling,” Ryoma said with a smile, closing one eye.

He didn’t give Sakuya a clear answer. If he had to say, he simply hadn’t underestimated Rhoadseria’s Ivory Goddess of War.

Besides, things usually get worse after they get better.

Ryoma sent Gennou out to scout the situation just in case, and that decision bore fruit. Sakuya didn’t ask Ryoma to elaborate any further.

Ryoma, too, held his tongue as they walked toward Fort Tilt, the day when he would lock blades with Helena on his mind.



A few days later, Lupis Rhoadserians and her northern subjugation army entered the burnt remains of the citadel city of Epirus. Regardless of how it had happened, they had still claimed an important enemy position, so one would expect them to rejoice at this victory. None of the soldiers seemed overjoyed, though. The fire had claimed the lives of thirty thousand men in a single night, and all the food and supplies they had plundered had been reduced to ashes alongside them.

As a direct result, each soldier’s rations were visibly smaller. The disgruntlement that caused, coupled with the fact that they felt the refugees were eating for free, intensified the soldiers’ discontent. They began criticizing Queen Lupis for agreeing to shelter the refugees to begin with.

Meltina Lecter could easily see this.

Like I thought, we’re getting nowhere with this. Our only chance is to keep marching forward.

She considered the situation over and over, but this was her only conclusion. She couldn’t come up with another solution, so she made her decision. They would have to march their armies into the Wortenia Peninsula to attack the Mikoshiba barony’s stronghold.

Chapter 4: The Tiger Cage Pass

The Wortenia Peninsula was once known as an undeveloped, uninhabitable no-man's-land infested with the most savage of monsters. It was a deserted land that rejected human life, a penal colony to which Rhoadseria's most hated and terrible criminals were sent.

There were only two ways of entering the peninsula from Rhoadseria. One was by the sea. Being an oblong peninsula that extended into the open ocean from the western continent's northeastern corner, it was much like an appendix jutting out of the cecum. As such, most of the peninsula was surrounded by the sea.

Of course, this didn't mean a ship could dock anywhere along its coast, but there were multiple inlets one could land in, and if one had a ship and a seasoned captain capable of navigating around the sea monsters reigning supreme in the ocean, one could land on the peninsula with relative ease.

It was this potential for sea trade that had allowed Ryoma to bolster the barony's economy after he was made governor of Wortenia following the civil war. It was for this purpose that he'd actively wiped out the pirates that had used the peninsula as their hideout for many years. The only disadvantage to speak of was that one had to make an initial investment in sturdy ships and seasoned sailors that could weather attacks from the monster-infested waters, so only people skilled in economics could successfully pull off this feat.

The only other way into the peninsula was, needless to say, by land, but it was not an easy path. The road connecting the Wortenia Peninsula to the continent's northeast was a route running along the Tilt Mountain range. The trees of this road were thick and overgrown enough to impede passage. It was the least favorable terrain for mobilizing an army.

What's more, the Tilt Mountains were a natural obstacle, the precipitous cliffs forming a topography that made it difficult for large groups to cross on foot. The mountain stood two to three thousand meters tall, extending like walls, and for most people, the cliff face was too steep to walk on. There were some flat areas along the way, but only animals could cross this path with relative ease. Even a mountaineer or mountain photographer would need a considerable amount of equipment to cross these mountains. It was otherwise

borderline impossible. That much was evident from the many adventurers who'd tried and failed to enter the Wortenia Peninsula.

The only safe way through was a long mountain road leading to where the Tilt Mountains converged to form a valley. Unlike a highway, which was protected by barrier pillars, this road was an unpaved animal trail. On top of that, the surrounding mountains were home to monsters that weren't daunted by the harsh terrain and were always prowling in search of new prey. The road truly felt like the entrance to a no-man's-land.

To adventurers who lacked the financial wherewithal to hire a ship, these mountains were the only way in. Indeed, many adventurers had made their way to Wortenia, hoping to make a fortune by hunting the precious materials obtainable only in this peninsula. They all had taken this path to get there—at least until the Mikoshiba barony came to govern Wortenia.

Ten days had passed since the northern subjugation army occupied the razed remains of Epirus. With this foothold, they only had to advance northeast in order to enter the Mikoshiba barony's heartland.

Perhaps the heavens were on their side, because the sun shone brightly down on them. The sky was clear, without a single cloud in sight—the perfect weather to march an army. Pious believers in the teachings of the Church of Meneos would have said that the God of Light was giving them his blessing to bring down the hammer of justice upon the Mikoshiba barony.

Nonetheless, the soldiers assembled at that spot weren't emboldened by the fine weather. Instead, they were all visibly anxious and overwhelmed by the sight before them.

Helena Steiner sat on her horse and used a pair of binoculars to see the situation for herself. She then clicked her tongue. At that moment, she realized the meaning of Ryoma's parting words when they met that night. Her brows furrowed.

So this is the card he hid up his sleeve. I can see why he was willing to go to war against an army of two hundred thousand. This is what he told me to look forward to.

A baffling sight spread out before Helena. The first thing to catch her eye was the imposing size of the Tilt Mountains. They truly were a natural fortification. This on its own wouldn't have been enough to daunt her, though. Until Ryoma came to govern the peninsula, it was a domain of Rhoadseria. While they lacked maps of the peninsula itself, their maps were relatively detailed up to the Tilt Mountains. The steep topography did not come as a surprise. True, they were more imposing than Helena had heard, but that wasn't what made her

pause.

The most prominent feature was the fortress built along the mountain road, although calling it a “fortress” was somewhat incorrect. It was a semipermanent defensive installation, likely built to serve as a checkpoint at the entrance to the Wortenia Peninsula during peacetime. To that end, it wasn’t so much a fort, which would be relatively easy to demolish, than it was something closer to a castle or a stronghold. Whatever one called it, its purpose was obvious; it was a defensive facility meant to keep enemies out.

The only word to describe this stronghold was “stout.” Helena could only estimate the height of the stone walls from afar, but they seemed to be about twenty to twenty-five meters tall, a match for the walls of the capital and Count Salzberg’s stronghold in Epirus. That alone made the prospect of attacking this fortress imposing.

If that was all, we’d still have a hand to play, but from a cursory look, he set up quite a few traps around here.

Tall walls were an impediment, but there were ways to get past them. One could use ladders or siege towers, and the northern subjugation army did have siege weapons, which included towers, but Helena spotted other aspects that would make it difficult to take this fort.

The ditch built around the gate is tricky. It makes it hard to bring siege weapons into range. And what would happen if we charged our troops forward?

Helena couldn’t tell how deep the ditch was, but either way, it made attacking the walls exceedingly dangerous.

During the last war, he dammed up River Thebes so that when the enemy soldiers set foot in the empty moat, he could flood the ditches and drown them all.

Ryoma had used this tactic to fend off Kael Iruna’s attack, costing the knight many of his men. It was a lethal tactic that resulted in a crushing defeat and turned the tides of the war.

Helena couldn’t tell yet if the possibility she dreaded was true, but if they were to take the safest route, they’d need to start filling in the moat. Still, she had her doubts about Ryoma repeating the same plan.

It’s highly unlikely he will do that given the terrain. There’s no water source on the scale of the Thebes in the area. If he did it, he’d have to draw water from the sea, but no matter how far the moat goes, it’s not long enough to access the ocean. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have another plan we’d have to be wary of...

Since the possibility of him reusing the same tactic remained, Helena did keep it in the corner of her mind, but there were other issues weighing on her too.

The spikes set in front of the moat are definitely there to impede our

soldiers.

This kind of fortification was called an abatis. It was a rather popular option, used often during Japan's Warring States period. It was a very simple fortification method; nearby trees were used to form sharp, two-ended stakes that were then driven into the earth. But for how simple it was, it was an effective deterrent against attackers. The stakes were thrust diagonally into the ground so as to face approaching enemies, stabbing into their legs. They could also have ropes tied between them meant to trip soldiers up.

Of course, Helena didn't know the word "abatis," but she'd seen things like it in her many years on the battlefield. She knew how to deal with such fortifications, but removing them took some effort.

And I should probably assume there's more than just one layer of walls here.

Looking from a flatland, it was impossible to see ahead, but it was perfectly reasonable to assume there was another layer of walls—if not several.

Most imposing of all was the fact that since the mountains blocked off the point of attack from both sides, the approach to the fortress was incredibly narrow. The road was more spread out at first, but the closer one came to the gate, the more the surrounding mountains seemed to clamp around the road, only allowing a handful of soldiers to pass at any one time.

In other words, the closer one came to the gate, the more narrow the road became and the fewer people could pass, like a phalanx formation. Such dense formations were by no means a bad tactic, and they were effective when driving one's army into the enemy on open fields, but when it came to besieging a castle, it was a bad play. If the enemy had ranged weaponry, clumping one's army together was simply lining them up as targets for arrows, boulders, or oil bottles, increasing their losses.

He seems intent on stalling the infantry, only to whittle them down from a safe distance with ranged weapons.

Castles, fortresses, and strongholds differed in scale and employed different means, but they all shared a single purpose: to keep intruders out and to reduce the enemy's numbers. The stronghold in front of Helena was clearly built with those objectives in mind. Even Helena, with her experience as the Ivory Goddess of War and the many victories under her belt, could see it would be difficult to take this fort.

Its structure uses the terrain wisely. Even with 170,000 men, it would be difficult to break in with a frontal assault. Not bad, Ryoma. I didn't expect you to have this kind of knowledge too.

Even though they had lost many soldiers during the first battle,

the northern subjugation army still held the overwhelming advantage when it came to numbers, and numbers translated directly to an army's strength. To properly use that strength, though, one had to keep the terrain in mind. The fortification Helena saw had been designed meticulously so that the enemy couldn't leverage their numerical advantage. Not even a seasoned soldier like Helena could find any flaws in this defense.

Nevertheless, as his enemy, Helena couldn't keep blindly praising Ryoma. In thirty minutes' time, the northern subjugation's leaders, including Queen Lupis, were to gather and discuss the invasion of the Wortenia Peninsula.

Relying on numbers to attack would be suicide. We'll have to prepare for a prolonged siege to break the enemy's morale, or gain ships to launch a surprise attack on the peninsula from the sea.

She was aware that each of those ideas had major issues, but even if just in name only, Helena was the commander in chief of this campaign. She would follow Queen Lupis's orders as supreme commander and put forth her best efforts to guide the army to victory.

But first we need to gather information. It might be too late to do so now, but we still have to do what we can.

They ought to have gathered information on the Mikoshiba barony's terrain and defensive installations before the war started, but Meltina, in her blind belief in a numerical advantage, had neglected to do so. Or rather, she'd had no choice but to forgo it. She had sent spies, but none of them had returned.

It would have been better to postpone the war, after all.

Once the spies didn't return, Helena had proposed that they postpone the northern subjugation, but doing so risked hurting the morale of the participating nobles, impacting the amount of rations and horse fodder they would bring to the war. In addition, Mikhail and Meltina had opposed the idea, rejecting it outright. Helena couldn't go against the two of them either. To begin with, she had the same misgivings as them. Even so, Helena seemed to have underestimated the situation.

And who's to say this fortress is the only ace he has up his sleeve?

Helena suspected that Ryoma had some kind of trump card hidden away. She knew him to be a shrewd, calculating man, and a man like him wouldn't challenge a country to war without a good deal of preparation. Be that as it may, all she had was the distinct *feeling* that he had something planned.

I thought that razing Epirus might have been that trump card, but apparently I was wrong.

She had considered that he was purposefully making Epirus seem defenseless so that he could kill Queen Lupis once she entered the

city, but he'd set fire to it far too quickly for that. In which case, the purpose of the razing was to strike a blow against the northern subjugation army's morale.

He probably didn't think this alone would turn the tide of the war, but he did act while keeping it in mind.

This war wasn't simple enough that it could be won by a single, vital blow. Then again, no one would actively leave themselves open to such a blow to begin with. This was why in boxing, one threw jabs to keep the enemy in check and chip away at their guard. War was much the same. Each single attack might have only a small effect on the overall campaign, but enough attacks would eventually make the enemy bleed.

And by the end, you bleed out and die.

This was much the same, but even knowing this, Helena couldn't do much. She was the commander in chief of the army, but Queen Lupis was part of the battle too, making her supreme commander. Helena was merely her aide. On paper, Helena had full command, but in practice, her hands were tied.

Moreover, Queen Lupis's true adjutants were Meltina and Mikhail. Both were high-ranking knights of pedigree and had received educations to match that. In addition, their past errors had served as valuable experience, and Helena could see that they were becoming more and more capable. But while they weren't incompetent, when it came to facing Ryoma Mikoshiba, they were clearly out of their league. Meltina and Mikhail weren't commanders; they were knights and warriors.

Those two may have improved somewhat, but they're still too impulsive.

If Helena were to say that to their faces, though, she'd just buy their ire, and it could push them to do something drastic to prove her wrong. Knowing this, Helena decided to let them act freely.

Meltina's choice wasn't necessarily wrong, considering we don't have any other options—at least, for as long as we don't have a strategy to resolve this.

Helena could try to go against their decision, but if they were to look to Queen Lupis to make a final call, that would put an end to all arguments. The only thing that would achieve would be further strain on Helena's relationship with Queen Lupis and her adjutants. Knowing this, Helena could only devote herself to fulfilling her duty—even if the outcome of that would mean the deaths of many.

“Now, let's get going, even if it will just end up being a farce.”

Helena put away the binoculars, turned around, and made her way to Queen Lupis's tent, the bitterness of the difficult war to come lingering in her heart.

Chris Morgan followed his honored lady into the tent. Although it was made for use in a war camp, it was spacious and furnished with expensive carpet. In its center was a long, U-shaped table. At the top of a table was a luxurious chair meant for Queen Lupis, while the seats for the other participants sat on either side of it.

Most of the chairs were already occupied. The only empty ones were Queen Lupis's and the ones adjacent to hers. Based on the number of chairs, twenty people were participating in this meeting. Over a hundred noble houses were part of the northern subjugation army, so only a handful of them were part of this council.

Gathering everyone here would be excessive.

This tent was special, set up for the explicit purpose of hosting a large group of people for war councils like this one, but it still wasn't large enough to accommodate one hundred people. Besides, those invited to this war council didn't come alone. Much like Helena, who'd brought her lieutenant Chris, the other members had come with their own retinue.

Helena passed by the lieutenants standing near the tent's wall and settled into the seat directly to the right of Queen Lupis's. As commander in chief of this army, it only made sense she would sit near the top of the table. Chris stood behind her and looked around the tent.

The guards will be asked to stand outside the tent, but the lieutenants must be present. Still, what a roster.

The nobles who were part of this council were all among the most prominent aristocrats in Rhoadseria. Present were Viscount Furio Gelhart, who was acting in secret to restore his authority and title as duke; Count Adelheit and Viscount Romaine, prominent members of the nobles' faction; and Count Hamilton and Count Eisenbach, who were forced to inherit their households following the deaths of their fathers in the House of Lords.

The Counts Hamilton and Eisenbach had especially high morale and were burning with desire to avenge their fallen fathers. The same could be said of most of the victims' families gathered here. To them, Ryoma's actions were treasonous and senselessly violent.

Yet wars weren't won entirely on morale, and their being nobles with power to match didn't mean they were also capable in military affairs. Most of them were more at home handling internal affairs instead. Their jobs were to make their domains flourish and collect taxes.

While none of them denied the importance of military might, most nobles weren't on the front lines, fighting and commanding soldiers. The higher a noble's rank, the larger their domain, so they were less likely to actively participate in military affairs.

There were exceptions, of course. Thomas Salzberg, one of the reasons behind this campaign, had been a high-ranking noble famous for his might as a warrior.

But he was an exception to the rule.

The Salzberg county had been charged with an important defensive position in northern Rhoadseria, and the head of the house had been required to be a capable military commander, but most of Thomas Salzberg's accolades as a warrior were attributed to his battles before he'd inherited the headship. The only war in recent years where he'd directly stood in the line of battle was his recent and final war with the Mikoshiba barony.

In this regard, most nobles didn't have any live combat experience, and those who did only participated in battles prior to rising to the headship to legitimize their succession rights.

Though it's debatable whether that counts as them being part of the war.

It was better than having no experience at all, but it was questionable whether there was much meaning to leading a war where everything was prepared for you.

Chris found people like them talking as if they knew it all laughable.

Even if they were capable warriors, more people at the discussion table isn't necessarily a good thing. There's no guarantee they'll come up with any good ideas, and it could make the discussion even more difficult to manage.

The northern subjugation army still had 170,000 troops left, but it was split between the Rhoadserian army, led by Queen Lupis, and the nobles' alliance army. The idea of Rhoadseria mustering all its soldiers to form a mighty force sounded good on paper, but realistically it was mostly a scraped-together mob of conscripts.

It was often said that too many cooks spoiled the broth, and including the arrogant, impatient nobles in a war council could easily send it spiraling out of control. That saying didn't exist in this world, but if Chris had known of it, he'd have certainly used it now. He knew that introducing such inconsistency to strategic decision-making could be terribly dangerous.

Especially when we're up against someone like that man.

Chris didn't much like Ryoma Mikoshiba, but it wasn't for the same bigoted dislike that nobles held toward upstart commoners. Now that Ryoma and his honored teacher and role model, Helena, had parted ways, Chris still retained a great deal of respect mixed with envy toward Ryoma. Putting aside any personal qualms he had, he held Ryoma in high regard. Ryoma's past achievements commanded that much respect.

Just the fact he has the courage to try and push back such a large army speaks to his pluck and talent.

Regardless of everything else, Chris had to admit that, and the very thought brought a smile to his lips. The change in his expression was subtle, but one person near him didn't fail to notice it.

Helena turned around to look at him, a slightly teasing glint in her eyes. "You seem quite amused. Did you spot anything interesting?"

She wasn't finding fault with his attitude, but the way Helena looked at him gave Chris the impression that she was peering into his thoughts, which sent a small shiver running down his spine.

"No, pardon me," he apologized at once. "I was just thinking."

As Helena's lieutenant, Chris was a high-ranking commander in the northern subjugation army. Given his position, he couldn't be heard praising the skills of the enemy general they were about to fight to the death. It was natural, then, that he'd chosen to apologize and refuse to elaborate any further. Helena didn't require any further explanation, though, since she seemed to understand what he was thinking.

"I see... Very well, then. But you should focus now. It's about to begin."

Helena suddenly gazed at the entrance of the tent. Queen Lupis was arriving.

Sensing the change in the atmosphere, the nobles all rose from their seats. A voice announced the queen's presence, and the tent flap opened. There stood Queen Lupis Rhoadserians of Rhoadseria, clad in pure white armor. Standing behind her were her two aides, Mikhail Vanash and Meltina Lecter.

Helena knelt, and everyone else followed suit—a gesture of utmost respect when in the presence of the monarch. Queen Lupis answered this by raising her hand and stepped inside. She then sank into the seat at the head of the table.

"We're in the middle of war, so there's no need to concern yourself with palace gestures. You may be at ease, everyone." Her words lightened the atmosphere in the tent.

Meltina was apparently the facilitator of this war council. If a facilitator was necessary to make sure the council proceeded smoothly, then Meltina was a good choice for that. However, that meant little if she didn't realize the opportunity she was given.

"Now then, let's begin the council. First, we need to discuss our current plans—"

As soon as Meltina spoke, one of the nobles got to his feet and angrily kicked his chair away. "You think we have time to be discussing our plans now?! We're a righteous army, gathered to bring that criminal upstart to justice! We just need to press the attack!"

Speaking like this in Queen Lupis's presence was very brave indeed, and had he read even a single strategy manual, he'd have known that no frontal assault would capture that fortress.

I believe that's the recently appointed Count Eisenbach. He's burning with a thirst for revenge for his father's murder at the House of Lords, but despite that, he's a complete amateur when it comes to war.

Chris was honestly astonished that the count would propose attacking the stronghold, and Helena, who remained silently seated, likely felt the same. Chris didn't know how much time Ryoma had spent building that fortress, but it had obviously taken him a long while. Ryoma Mikoshiba had known he would eventually face Queen Lupis in war and made preparations for it ahead of time.

Attacking a fortress meticulously prepared by the Devil of Heraklion... Even if we use up every soldier we have, all 170,000 of them, we wouldn't topple it.

Chris wasn't beset by cowardice; he simply knew that mere foolhardiness wasn't enough to win a war—especially not when they were so intimately familiar with the enemy's capabilities. If they were to blindly charge into that fortress, it would only end in bloody tragedy on their side.

But the real problem is how everyone else is reacting. I had a feeling this would happen.

Chris sighed. To him, Count Eisenbach's proposal was too foolish to even spare a thought on, but the other nobles seemed spurred by the count's words. What's more, Meltina, the facilitator, hadn't interrupted him, and as a result, the other nobles voiced their agreement.

"I see... Yes, perhaps charging in with full force is better than resorting to petty tricks."

"Yes, the more time we waste, the more likely that man will resort to trickery."

The nobles murmured in consent, seemingly blind to the fortress standing in their way.

They say people only hear and see what they want to, but are they really this foolish?

Chris sighed again, lamenting the fact that these were the people with whom he had to fight against that monster of a man.

It was then that Meltina finally spoke up. "I've heard all of your opinions, but I'd like to hear what Lady Helena has to say as commander in chief of this army," she said, turning her eyes to Helena.

"Initially, we assumed we'd be facing Ryoma Mikoshiba on the field while he holed up in Epirus, but he minimized the front line by abandoning his occupied domain. We clearly have the numerical

advantage, but considering that we don't know the structure of that fortress, trying to force our way in would be too dangerous. I suggest our army retreats for a time so we may have a fresh start. Otherwise, assuming supplies aren't an issue, we prepare for a prolonged siege so as to lower the enemy's morale."



Helena's suggestion was a safe one, and it reflected the reality of the situation. The nobles, however, only responded with angry shouts.

"That's absurd! What is that naive strategy?!"

"Agreed. I don't see why our troops should fall back at this point."

"To think Helena Steiner would come up with such a slow plan. I hear Rearth has a saying for those who have lived past their glory days. 'How the mighty have fallen,' yes? I'd say it fits this situation perfectly."

They spoke with scorn and mockery, directing their dark enmity at Helena. From their perspective—or perhaps more accurately, so they convinced themselves—Baron Mikoshiba was but an insect not to be feared.

If Mikoshiba was that insignificant, we wouldn't need this many nobles to conquer a frontier territory, now would we? Surely they realize that. But with everyone else watching, none of them can openly endorse caution.

This had been obvious to Chris before this council had even started, but seeing his expectations turn out to be correct didn't make him any happier. At this rate, they would end up deciding to go into a reckless, dangerous siege battle.

At that point, we'd have to figure out how to suppress their hard-line arguments without bruising their dignity.

This was a natural conclusion for anyone leading an army. From a military standpoint, the nobles' demands were certainly foolish, but if their arguments were to be beaten down with sound logic, their dignity wouldn't stand for it. Trying to suppress their ideas would just intensify their backlash and run the risk of their disobeying orders to storm the fortress of their own accord. In a sense, the point of this war council was figuring out how to delicately overturn the nobles' demands without bruising their dignity and keep them under Helena's command and control.

I hate that we must play along with this farce, but we have no choice.

In Chris's heart brewed something between frustration and resignation. He believed Helena must have felt the same way, but apparently, he was making empty assumptions. Rather than argue back, Helena smiled, looking around at the nobles.

"I see... With your morale so high, it might be possible to force open those gates with numbers alone. I made that proposal based on traditional theory, but as commander in chief, I can't risk lowering your morale. You have my apologies."

Helena had just apologized as commander in chief—something that normally wouldn't ever happen. Her words had made the nobles, who had spoken so passionately just moments ago, shrink back with guilty expressions.

Helena Steiner's name carried a great deal of weight and influence in Rhoadseria. She was a hero who'd saved the kingdom from crisis several times over, and as commander in chief of the northern subjugation army, she held high authority and command over the entire army. Pressuring such a person to the point of forcing an apology out of her left even the most arrogant of nobles ill at ease.

Despite their reactions, Helena carried on. "Now then, as for the attack, we'll have to decide which forces will lead the charge."

The nobles became speechless. They'd never expected their suggestion to attack the fortress would be decided on so easily.

Helena continued the talks, without regard for their reactions, and looked around before nominating one of the nobles. "In that case, I think we'll have Count Eisenbach do the honors. What do you think, Your Majesty?"

"Very well." Queen Lupis nodded briefly and looked to the count. "Count Eisenbach, you will lead the charge. Capture that fortress and bring the traitor's head to me."

Count Eisenbach's face turned crimson red, and he beat his chest in a show of force. The queen's direct word had stirred up his morale, and his mind was occupied by one word and one word only: victory.

"I accept your orders, Your Majesty. I promise you Baron Mikoshiba's head!"

"Bold words. I look forward to it." Satisfied, Queen Lupis nodded, then looked to the nobles around the table.

"Everyone, work in tandem with Count Eisenbach's vanguard as you charge the fort. Understood?"

This was the queen of Rhoadseria speaking; it wasn't a question or request, but a royal edict. What's more, neither the queen nor her two aides, Mikhail and Meltina, seemed to have any intent of stopping this decision from being put into practice. In fact, it almost seemed like they'd wished for this to happen.

The surrounding nobles didn't seem to notice this, however, instead making boastful promises.

"As you wish! We will prove our valor!"

"We can't let Count Eisenbach hog all the glory to himself, can we? I will be the one to capture the fort!"

The nobles rose from their seats, thrusting their fists up high.

Chris remained silent, his eyes fixed on Helena's back as she remained seated wordlessly.



That night, Chris visited Helena's tent alone. His mouth was dry, and his expression was blank. He was nervous, and he knew it. The sentry guarding the entrance to the tent seemed to notice something

was off about the lieutenant and stood there on edge too.

That makes sense.

The war council had ended in a way Chris had never expected, but the real issue was the reason he hadn't seen it coming. Was he simply too inept to properly predict this? If so, he was better off; he could get away with this by humbly admitting his faults and trying to improve. But what if that wasn't the reason?

Maybe I shouldn't be asking this, but...

Since he couldn't deny the possibility of another reason, Chris started doubting how to conduct himself going forward. He had no choice but to come to Helena for the answer.

"Lady Helena, may I come in?"

"Yes, Chris, of course. Come in."

With her permission, Chris entered the tent. As commander in chief, Helena had been given a spacious tent, ten square meters in size. An expensive carpet adorned the ground, making it quite comfortable as tents went—a difference of heaven and earth from the tents most soldiers had to sleep in.

The resident of this tent, on the other hand, wore a dark expression. "No need to stand while you talk, dear. Take a seat on the sofa. I'll brew you some tea."

Helena got up from her work desk, which was stacked with papers, and turned on a portable cooking stove by the wall. The device used endowed thaumaturgy and didn't require any kindling or fuel. It was like a gas stove used for training, but even smaller. It was a very expensive piece of equipment, only available for high officers.

The water boiled in no time at all, and after preparing the tea, Helena sat down. Chris took a seat across from her on the sofa by one of the tent's walls and sighed.

I think I see now...

Helena hadn't called a soldier to prepare the tea—she'd done it herself. This wasn't typical of a commanding officer. On top of that, it had taken her no time at all to prepare the drinks. She even had tea cakes prepared. All this implied that she had been expecting him to come by, which meant that the war council earlier that day had all gone according to her expectations.

The question is why...

Chris looked intently at Helena, waiting for her to speak.

"You look like you have misgivings about today's war council." Helena brought her cup to her lips and sipped on it like she was teasingly testing it for poison.

Chris nodded sincerely. "In truth, it's not so much that I have misgivings. I just want to find out why."

"Why, you ask?" Helena gave him a tired smile. "So that we may

win, of course.”

“By going on a frontal assault? Surely you’re joking. It’s a stout fortress built upon natural defenses!” Chris retorted, his tone becoming harsher.

It can’t be... Is she seriously saying a frontal attack will help us win here?!

While he wasn’t spouting any insults, he was clearly criticizing Helena—even looking down on her. It was like asking a scholar what one and one added up to and being told the answer was three. It wasn’t in any way how a lieutenant was supposed to act around his commanding officer, and in most cases, he could have been demoted and reprimanded for his actions.

Chris would have never spoken to Helena like this before, but the moment they decided to part ways with the Mikoshiba barony, Chris had started to question Helena’s judgment. His doubts were starting to show in his words.

Helena didn’t fault Chris for this, though. “Yes. If nothing else, relying on numbers is the best way to achieve victory right now. You’re right, strategically speaking, it’s not a very wise choice, and we will no doubt suffer many casualties.”

“And knowing all that, you’re still approving a frontal assault?”

“I realize it’s a terrible choice, but at this point, it’s our only chance at winning.”

Chris noticed the cold glint in Helena’s eyes. “Why?” he asked again.

Helena gave Chris a probing look, seeing right into him. Heaving a small sigh, she started speaking in a grave tone.

“Have you checked how many rations we have?”

“Our rations? Well, it’s an army of two hundred thousand, so the rationing would be harsh, but it should last for this expedition. What of it?”

An army marched on its stomach. It was a major issue that applied in all wars, regardless of place or time period. This was why Sun Tzu advised to forgo stocking up on food within one’s country, but to focus on pillaging the enemy for their supplies.

It was clear this advice didn’t apply this time, however. Queen Lupis had stated that her army could pillage the Mikoshiba barony’s domain, but pillaging alone couldn’t support such a large army on its own. Preparing men and supplies was why it had taken so long to gather the army in the first place. They’d had to reap supplies from all across Rhoadseria to support such a large army for several months.

But wait... No, I suppose our preparations weren’t thorough.

The image of Epirus burning in crimson flames flashed in Chris’s mind, along with that of its original inhabitants. It was then that Chris

broke into a cold sweat.

Helena could tell from the change in his expression that he had arrived at the truth. “Correct. Our original plan supported two hundred thousand men, but that’s not enough anymore, thanks to Ryoma’s ploy of forcing us to shelter the commoners living in this area.”

A group of fifty thousand refugees had come to them for help days ago. If it had just been that many people, they wouldn’t have been that heavy of a burden, but Queen Lupis had created a ripple effect, and refugees from all across Rhoadseria had come to the northern subjugation army, requesting their queen’s protection. The population of Epirus and its surrounding villages probably exceeded a hundred thousand people.

And the entirety of northern Rhoadseria likely comes up to twice that.

The army was technically allowed to pillage against commoners that lived under the Mikoshiba barony’s occupation, but that didn’t apply to refugees who rejected and sought to escape Baron Mikoshiba’s rule. They’d made the choice to remain loyal to Rhoadseria and live under Queen Lupis’s rule—the very definition of patriots—so when such loyal subjects had come to her for help, Queen Lupis hadn’t been able to reject them.

Queen Lupis’s regime is not a successful or wealthy one, but even so, her image as a beautiful and caring queen that provides for the people is what keeps this country together. She can’t afford to shatter that image.

In that light, it was clear that her choices were limited.

“Not to mention, the burning of Epirus was a painful blow. If we’d taken the city, we’d have been able to house the commoners for a time, but after that inferno burned it down, it’s doubtful there’s even enough roofs to place over their heads.”

“In that case...” Chris started.

“Right now, Meltina and Mikhail are scrambling to reorganize the supply line from the rear while keeping the growing number of refugees in mind. In other words, the ones being subjected to starvation tactics aren’t the Mikoshiba barony, the defenders, but rather us, the attackers.”

Chris now fully understood the situation. “So that’s what happened. You proposed a full retreat or a prolonged siege to cut off the nobles’ own retreat, didn’t you?”

Helena nodded. “They swore victory before the queen and denied the safe options their commander in chief proposed, even going so far as to mock me. They can’t turn back now. If they do, they’ll be punished under the queen’s name. They have no choice but to push forward, no matter the cost.”

“Then can’t we retreat and reorganize our forces?”

Chris hadn't realized that they were that cornered, but if what Helena said was true, it was all the more reason to pull back and start the war over from square one.

Helena shook her head. "Retreating now isn't an option. Even though our food situation is at risk, we still outwardly maintain the overwhelming advantage in this war. If we force a retreat now, the refugees will think we abandoned them, and the nobles participating in the subjugation will be displeased. From their perspective, the war would end with them having gained nothing, and considering the state of the north, they wouldn't receive any rewards for their participation either."

Her words had a scathing edge to them, mocking the nobles who clamored on about how they participated in this war to bring the treasonous baron to justice. There was no justice in how the northern subjugation army worked: there was only the banner of justice, meant to mask personal revenge, and a greedy desire to take away Baron Mikoshiba's riches. If the nobles were to fail to achieve either of those objectives, their disgruntlement would turn to Lupis, who had ordered the northern subjugation.

"To avoid that, our only choice is to attack the fortress. If we give the order, we at least avoid the possibility of the nobles taking matters into their own hands and attacking the fort without our consent, yes? And this is also a golden chance to cull the numbers of those foolish nobles too."

"And Her Majesty knows this?"

"Of course she does. I couldn't make such an important decision on my own discretion."

Chris was rendered speechless, and Helena watched him silently while sipping on her tea.



The following day, when the sun rose in the east, the blowing of a horn echoed through the foot of the Tilt Mountains. At this signal, the northern subjugation army's 170,000 troops began their march on Fort Tilt.

It was a menacing sight; the army looked like it could blot out the sky. Nevertheless, looking down at the enemy marching on him, Ryoma's expression didn't change one bit. Instead, a confident smile played on his lips.

Laura stood behind him. Her eyes were full of mercy for the soldiers in front of her and scorn for the commander who had ordered them into this march. "I had my doubts about how the enemy army would respond when faced with Fort Tilt, but as you predicted, they were foolish enough to choose to attack it with brute force."

“True.” Ryoma nodded. “From their perspective, they didn’t have much of a choice, and they believe they have the advantage. Of course, Lady Helena probably knows exactly what’s happening, but even though she’s commander in chief, she doesn’t have full rights over the northern subjugation army. She likely decided that she can’t keep the nobles’ wishes in check, so it’s better to let them roam free than to stop them. That way, they’d at least maintain offensive momentum.”

I guess relying on numbers sounds nice and simple, but they’re not that stupid. They probably realized my plan by now and are scrambling to rebuild their supply line.

On top of that, they were sending the foolish nobles out to serve as vanguards. That way, no matter which way this turned out, the queen’s side wouldn’t lose much. If the nobles somehow managed to capture the fort, then that was fine. Lupis could just praise their achievements and reward them accordingly. But if the nobles were to lose and get nearly wiped out, Helena would be fine with that too. The fact that nobles would attack such a natural fortress with a frontal assault proved that they had no understanding of tactics. Plus, given that the northern subjugation’s supplies were insufficient, this was a good chance to reduce the number of mouths they had to feed.

That’s what I would do, anyway.

The nobles were basically a neutral pawn—even if they lost, the army as a whole wouldn’t lose much. Yes, they were losing troops, but effectively wasting these unnecessary soldiers could prove advantageous. The question was how much of this Helena, Queen Lupis, and Meltina had planned.

“Well, regardless of whether they had this in mind, it won’t change how I’m going to respond.”

This was the front line of their defense—a position that Ryoma had ordered Boltz to build. It was more than just that, though. It was an impregnable fortress that made use of natural defenses. If the northern subjugation army were to try and break through it with brute force, they would experience true hell.

This fort truly is a cage to capture the tiger that is the northern subjugation army. I should call it the Tiger Cage Pass.

Ryoma cracked a sarcastic smile despite himself. Once, there was a fortress in ancient China known as the Tiger Cage Pass. Also known as Sishui Pass, it was an important position guarding the then capital of China. In *The Annals of Three Kingdoms*, it was the site of the famous battle between Dong Zhuo’s army and the alliance between Yuan Shao and Cao Cao.

Of course, the *Annals* was a work of fiction and not a history book, but Ryoma had read this story in his youth and was quite engrossed

by it. He particularly admired Lü Bu Fengxian, the Flying General.

The thought that Ryoma, a high school boy, would have to command a situation so similar to that battle from *The Annals of Three Kingdoms* was moving. It was indeed the kind of situation of which any fan of the Three Kingdoms would fantasize.

But if I'm the one hiding in the Tiger Cage Pass to intercept a large army, that means I'm the Dong Zhuo in this situation. And while I don't think I'm that bad of a tyrant, I'd rather be Cao Cao, if I could choose.

Ryoma wasn't reckless enough to want the role of Liu Bei, known as the virtuous general, but at the same time, he didn't want the role of Dong Zhuo, who was synonymous with corruption and evil. Cao Cao was also depicted as evil in *The Annals of Three Kingdoms*, but unlike Dong Zhuo, Cao Cao achieved great things as both a warrior and a politician.

Dong Zhuo had the image of a terrible villain who ruled the city Luoyang with an iron fist, while Cao Cao was seen as more of a cunning rogue who did what was necessary to win in an era of turbulent war. It was natural, then, that Ryoma would prefer to have his role over Dong Zhuo's.

But as a matter of fact, Ryoma shared some similarities with Dong Zhuo. Ryoma's setting fire to Epirus was similar to Dong Zhuo's setting fire to the city of Luoyang to retreat to Chang'an. If Koichiro were to hear of this, he'd gleefully tell Ryoma of his resemblance to Dong Zhuo.

Talk about having a supportive family...

Lament though he might, the furnace of war had been set aflame, meaning Ryoma had little time to bask in reveries, so he thrust his right hand to the heavens. The following second, the sound of bells and drums shook the air, and battle cries rose up from the fortress. Then a shower of arrows fell from the sky.

This was the start of the Siege of Fort Tilt—an event that would go down in history as a gruesome battle to be remembered years later.

Epilogue

A fortress built in the Tilt Mountains marked the border between the Wortenia Peninsula and the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. It was an impregnable stronghold built along a naturally defensive position.

Standing outside this fort, Lupis Rhoadserians's northern subjugation army rushed in to launch its third siege battle that day. Countless arrows flew over the fortress walls toward them, blotting out the sky. Those arrows soon arced downward, becoming a merciless rain that plummeted down on the charging troops, claiming their lives.

The outcome was screaming and death. Red stains spread across the soil, but the barrage didn't stop the northern subjugation army's charge. As their comrades tumbled lifelessly to the ground, soldiers stepped over their dead bodies, holding up simple wooden shields to survive the hail of arrows and march on the fortress.

Countless arrows stabbed into the shields they held overhead, giving them the appearance of porcupines. Even so, their governors ordered them to fill out the moat, and they couldn't refuse. Unsure of how long their wooden shields would last, some carried sandbags for extra protection.

Next, more arrows and ceramic jars full of oil, stuffed with burning rags, greeted them. The area around the fortress was now occupied by two types of corpses: those shot dead by arrows and those burned alive by the flames.

The sight repeated over and over; the soldiers' commanders repeated their reckless orders, instructing their soldiers to continue their blind charge. Even the nobles realized on some level that both tactically and strategically, this was nothing but a meaningless gesture.

"We can't! Tell the family head that charging any longer will get us nowhere! We need to fall back and regroup!" one man shouted, his helmet covered in blood and mud. His plate armor, a family heirloom, was almost always polished to a sheen, yet now it was completely covered in filth. Usually, he would have ordered his attendants to clean it by now, but at this moment, appearances were the least of his concerns.

Dammit! Their shots have so much force to them. I didn't think they'd penetrate my armor.

Thankfully, the hits he took missed his vitals, so it didn't influence his ability to fight, but whether this luck would persist was up to the goddess of fate's whimsy. A single hit at the wrong spot would be all it took to do him in.

A normal bow and arrow would never produce such results. His armor was designed with the idea that the knight wearing it would be using martial thaumaturgy, making it much sturdier and better protected than ordinary plate mail alone. Thanks to that, most blows could not damage its wearer. A normal arrow would, at most, scratch the armor's surface.

It was for this reason that, in this world, bows and arrows were not considered a viable form of weaponry. This wasn't to say they were never used in siege warfare, but the most accepted way of fighting in this world was melee combat using martial thaumaturgy.

Of course, heavy armor has its disadvantages, mostly in the form of reduced mobility, but the overwhelming defense it afforded its wearer more than made up for that flaw, granting them a decided advantage on the field of battle. Only a tightly drawn bow could penetrate armor this thick. Still, the fact that the armor protected him from fatal injury meant this man was much better off than his fellow soldiers. Strewn across the soil all around him were the corpses of conscripts who didn't have the luxury of expensive armor.

Taking revenge for the previous head? Such stupidity! If the head wanted revenge for his dead father's murder, he'd be standing in the front lines with us! Why do I have to risk my life in this war?!

Anger and resentment brewed in the man's heart. He was one of the knights in the service of the Eisenbach county. As a high-ranking knight, he had authority over a force of one hundred knights. Normally, fighting on the front lines would be below him. But Count Eisenbach had ordered him to participate directly and break the stalemate.

Since they'd chosen not to engage in protracted war, their only way to lay siege to this fortress would be by going on an all-out offensive, which meant someone had to command the vanguard. Even if he knew that they'd be fighting on the entrance to hell...

Unfortunately for him, the fickle goddess of fate did not smile at the man again.

He felt a dull impact on his head and heard the sound of metal ringing out. Then his consciousness went dark and cut off at once. It was the moment his life flickered out, like a light being turned off at the flick of a switch.



As the sounds of shouting and yelling echoed from outside the

fortress, Ryoma and Koichiro sat in one of the fortress's rooms, taking afternoon tea. Though they were in the middle of a siege, they were acting at their leisure. The Malfist sisters, who stood on both sides of their table, wore cheerful expressions as well.

The bitter fragrance of Qwiltantian tea hung in the air, complimenting the sournesses of the fruit skins Kikuna Samejima kneaded into their cookies and forming an exquisite balance of flavor. With this atmosphere, no one would believe they were at the heart of a battlefield, but despite this, even Ryoma understood that this wasn't the time and place. Unlike most tea parties, everyone present was wearing heavy armor. That didn't justify the out of place event, but no one seemed to care enough to point that out.

Talk about complacency, Ryoma thought to himself as he munched on a cookie and glanced out the window.

From where he sat, he couldn't see the first layer of walls, where the fighting was ongoing. Fort Tilt had three layers of walls, and Ryoma's study was far behind the third layer. Listening carefully, he could hear the sound of over two hundred thousand people fighting on both sides, but he couldn't possibly see the combat taking place at the first layer.

"You seem quite composed," Koichiro said, looking at Ryoma with an upturned glance.

"Do I? I'll have you know I'm pretty nervous right now." Ryoma shrugged, yet the smile on his lips spoke to his true feelings.

"I suppose you would be confident, given all the preparations you made," Koichiro mused.

"I guess... I think I did the best I could to prepare for this, if I do say so myself."

The Malfist sisters nodded in affirmation. They knew better than anyone how much Ryoma had prepared for this war.

"Indeed, Master Ryoma. Boltz has been putting forth every effort to build Fort Tilt ever since you came to govern Wortenia."

"Sara is right. No army could topple this stronghold by relying only on brute force."

That was no exaggeration. The deep moats and abatis weren't the only things keeping the enemies away. The fortress was divided into three sectors, each separated by tall walls. Even if they managed to penetrate the first wall and invaded the fort's interior, Ryoma's army was prepared to push them back.

"A truly impregnable fort. No, on this scale, it can only be called a stronghold," Laura said. Ryoma nodded, satisfied.

Fort Tilt was a key position for the Mikoshiba barony and very much its lifeline, so a great deal of effort and resources had been invested into developing it.

Seeing Ryoma's reaction, Koichiro gave him a curious look. "I've been questioning for a long time why you didn't name Fort Tilt the 'Tilt Stronghold.' Once this war ends, you're planning on this site only serving as a checkpoint for gathering supplies, yes?"

Koichiro had had his doubts about it for some time. To begin with, the standard to determine what kind of defensive installation a place could be called was vague. Castles were clearly the best kind of defensive positions, while forts were generally considered minor defensive facilities compared to strongholds or castles. By contrast, a stronghold came across as more threatening, with a scale equaling or exceeding a castle.

Even then, in Japan's Warring States period, there were forts made of stones that were as sturdy as any castle, and there were simple, shingle-roofed castles. With that in mind, the standards of how a defensive installation was named only seemed even more vague. One also had to consider that the reasons for building a fortress weren't limited to defensive installations. Forts could be set up to secure an offensive position.

With so many opinions, the semantics of naming defensive installations were complicated. Other factors included the importance of the position in which they were built. However, considering its position in the Tilt Mountains and the importance of its position—to safeguard the highway to Sirius—its scale did seem closer to a stronghold.

Sensing Koichiro's doubts, Ryoma smiled wryly. "I understand your misgivings, grandpa, but honestly, the reasons are pretty minor."

"That is to say?"

"It's simple, really. When I built this place, I had to get permission from Count Salzberg. I figured calling it a fort rather than a stronghold would make it easier for him to consent."

At the time, Ryoma had needed to make all sorts of arrangements to properly start governing Wortenia. From the start, Count Salzberg had been wary of the upstart baron who'd become his next door neighbor. Of course, Ryoma had no intention of needlessly provoking the count, but on the other hand, he realized that securing the Tilt Mountains as a defensive position was absolutely necessary to defend his realm. Even back then, Ryoma had been preparing for a future war with Lupis Rhoadserians.

Knowing this, Ryoma had worded himself carefully when building Fort Tilt. There wasn't much difference between saying, "I'm building a fort," and "I'm building a stronghold," but the wording mattered when asking Count Salzberg for permission, since the latter would make him less likely to consent.

Koichiro nodded, satisfied with the explanation, and brought the

cup to his lips. "I see... Then let me take this chance to ask you another question." He directed a probing glance at his grandson. "What do you plan to do next? Just sit in this fortress and wait for the enemy's supplies to run out?"

Ryoma smiled. The razing of Epirus had whittled down the enemy numbers significantly, but their remaining 170,000 soldiers were still a threat. By contrast, Ryoma only had slightly over 30,000 troops. Considering that the Mikoshiba barony was a up-and-coming regional governor's faction, those numbers were astounding, but they still didn't match the sheer size of the Rhoadserian army.

Ryoma had spun all sorts of plots to narrow down the numerical disadvantage, but the difference in size between the two armies was still vast. Considering this difference, holing up in his fort seemed the safest option.

But that's just on the surface.

A large army was certainly a threat, but it inevitably had many weak spots. Especially in this army, the nobles' alliance convoluted the chain of command, meaning that the larger the army was, the more weaknesses it had. More fatal than even that was that a large army consumed supplies and equipment at an extraordinary rate. There was no telling how many supplies this army would have to consume in a protracted war. Even if they prepared the most meticulous supply plan, it would fail sooner or later. In this regard, holing up within Fort Tilt, with its natural defenses, was not just a viable option, but also the safest one.

That wouldn't be any fun, though.

Focusing on defense and turtling up would eventually deplete the northern subjugation army's supplies, forcing them to retreat, but Ryoma considered acting more proactively to take out their food supply. Moreover, he'd already completed the preparations for this plan. Its aim was the same as forcing the Epirus residents who rejected him onto Queen Lupis before razing their city.

Ryoma shrugged at his grandfather's question. "Well, no matter how sturdy Fort Tilt's walls might be, staying on the defensive is going to take a toll on morale sooner or later, so I figured we need to have a change of pace right about now."

Depending on who heard these words, they would come across as very vague, but Koichiro understood him perfectly.

"Hmm, come to think of it, I haven't seen those two for a few days now. I thought they were guarding the first wall, but they were never well suited for defending a fort," Koichiro said.

It seemed Koichiro had realized something, and his guess was apparently correct.

Those two are commanders suited for both attack and defense, but

they really are more offensive. Having them wait around in a fortress's defensive line would be a waste of their talents.

This was why Ryoma had ordered them to handle another job—a lethal plot that would deliver a blow to topple the northern subjugation army. To enable that, Ryoma had asked Nelcius and his dark elves to create something for him.

If all goes according to schedule, they should be halfway up the river Thebes right around now.

Ryoma answered Koichiro with a savage smile. The Thebes was a long, winding river similar in size to the Yellow River or the Yangtze River in Ryoma's world. While sailing along it would be faster than going on foot, the journey would still take a while, especially when trying to move about stealthily.

But the fact it doesn't require the wind makes it that much faster.

This was part of why Ryoma had invested so many funds into this plan, and so he was confident in this idea. He could vividly imagine that the woman known as the Whirlwind and the twin blades he'd lent her would quietly sneak in and stab Lupis Rhoadserians's northern subjugation army in its entrails.



A few days later, as thick clouds hid the moon from sight, casting the world into dark night, a ship appeared from the bottom of the river that supported Rhoadseria's agriculture, the Thebes. Anyone who saw this sight would surely doubt their eyes. The first thing that came to mind were faint, wavering lights. From a distance, it looked as if will-o'-the-wisps were dancing across the river's surface.

The source of that light was single lamps dangling off the bows of the boats, lighting the way, but in the darkness, it would be easy to confuse them for something else.

What's more, the boats looked quite unusual. The whole vessel was dyed black, giving it an ominous impression that conjured an image of imposing death. In such a dark night, it would surely feel as if the grim reaper himself was sailing across the waters, seeking to claim the souls of the dead.

In addition, for whatever reason, these boats were sailing *up* the river, against the current. It almost looked like they were opposing the very rules of nature. After all, ships essentially only sailed downstream. This was a fundamental law that applied in any world.

A boat sailing downstream was a normal sight. Depending on the strength of the current, it could eventually reach as far as the sea by surrendering itself to the river's flow.

However, that wasn't true for boats trying to sail upstream. One could go so far as to say that it was fighting the rules of nature. The

crew would have to use oars or paddles, or rely on the wind with sails to do so. In the most extreme case, they would have to connect the boat to horses that rode along the riverside to tow the ship against the current. Any of those methods would be conspicuous.

Nevertheless, these boats sailed silently across the water. They had no sails or oars, to say nothing of horses towing the boat along. Despite that, the boats were sliding across the water and moving upstream.

Their hulls were long, slender, and graceful, and they were likely flat-bottomed boats. They sailed up the stream with startling speed, and in large numbers at that. It was hard to count them in the dark, but there were certainly more than a dozen or two, if not double that.

Anyone who saw them would be tempted to believe this was some kind of otherworldly sight, but the ones riding the boats were neither gods nor devils, but mere humans. The effortless travel was no divine miracle; it was the work of the dark elves' endowed thaumaturgy, which required the boats' passengers to simply spin a propeller installed on the vessels. The boats were dyed black to optimize stealthy movement under the cover of night, out of consideration for the mission's unique nature.

The lamps dangling on the boats' bows were there for safety reasons. All the ships' crew members could use martial thaumaturgy, allowing them to see keenly in the dark, but the light made it easier to confirm the distance between boats and prevent collisions. So while an onlooker might be taken aback at the boats' fearsome appearances, they looked the way they did out of consideration for utility.

It's not that they have no reason to call us demons anyway, though.

If they were to accomplish the mission their lord gave them, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria would be plunged into further chaos and bloodshed. From the enemy's perspective, they would feel as if they'd been cast into this plight at the hands of terrible demons, so seeing these boats as some kind of otherworldly evil would not be entirely inaccurate.

We are working for the Devil of Heraklion, after all.

Such thoughts crossed Robert's mind as he stood in the ship's bow, his arms crossed as he gazed ahead.

Honestly, that man looks like a god or a saint to those on his side, but to his enemies, he feels more like a devil.

Ryoma was certainly a compassionate man. He wasn't merciless like the nobles were; he didn't see people as tools to be used until they broke. He was trustworthy, and on top of that, resourceful enough to promote mercenaries into his generals and welcome enemy commanders to his side.

One example of this was the House of Lords' bailiff, Douglas

Hamilton. Though he had received money under the table from Ryoma, he'd still obeyed Duke Hamilton's orders to harass the young baron. He had subjected Ryoma to a body check, which had long since been unnecessary for nobles, and forced him to disarm himself. Also, before the questioning began, he'd kept Ryoma for hours on end in a room that was essentially a prison cell. He didn't hurt Ryoma physically, but Douglas had treated him in a way that any ordinary noble would resent.

But even Douglas was part of the Mikoshiba barony now, his family living in the city of Sirius. If Ryoma had the patience of an ordinary noble, Douglas and his family would have been dead by now. This reflected greatly on Ryoma's nature.

On the other hand, Ryoma could be extremely cold and calculating when the need called for it. He always acted out of good reason, but his severe, iron will struck dignity and fear into the hearts of all who saw him.

They say the talented are equipped with both good and evil. He truly is a natural leader.

Ryoma had spent a fortune on buying slaves, only to free them and allow them to live in his domain as his citizens. Any noble who heard that would sneer at his naivety, but at the same time, Ryoma had used the Epirus citizens who refused his rule as a tool in starvation tactics—a vile idea indeed.

Robert's appraisal was accurate, but the fact remained that Ryoma was an easy master to serve under. Robert held no complaints. Though he wouldn't confess it to Ryoma's face, he very much enjoyed serving him.

It's definitely never boring with him around.

As a warrior, Ryoma was nearly Robert's and Ignus's equal. The two of them had the advantage in their mastery of martial thaumaturgy, but Ryoma was the more capable martial artist by a wide margin. Plus, on top of his martial prowess, Ryoma was capable in both internal and external affairs.

Of course, Robert and Signus were both transcendent warriors and highly capable commanders. In fact, if their families hadn't shunned them, they could have become royal knights and distinguished themselves. And if their careers had gone far enough, one of them could have been nominated to succeed Helena as general in chief.

Be that as it may, even distinguished commanders like them were unfamiliar with a country's internal and external affairs. They also couldn't involve themselves in the development of new weapons, machines, and medicine like Ryoma could.

Just look at these boats. Apparently, they're based on something called "longships" from the other world. I knew he was working with Nelcius and

Simone to make something, but I didn't think they'd make something like this. Just how many aces is he hiding up his sleeve?

The very idea of sailing up a river without the use of oars or paddles was entirely alien to the people of this world. To make it possible, Ryoma had made deals with the dark elves and the people of Myest.

The whole process was mind-boggling for Robert. These kinds of novel ideas would surely be what enabled the Mikoshiba barony's victory. Whenever that thought crossed Robert's mind, his fist clenched up in excitement.

I feel like a kid before his first battle...

Robert Bertrand was excited by what was to come.

Ryoma Mikoshiba... A conqueror that rose up from the lowborn...

The idea of a commoner who came from nowhere, only to win a war that divided a country in half felt like a hero's mythological story. It was hard to tell at this point if he would win this war too, but win or lose, Ryoma Mikoshiba's name would leave an indelible mark on Rhoadseria's history books.

Helping such a hero with his ambitions, participating in such a massive war... As a warrior, Robert longed for nothing more, so he restrained his raging heart, dreaming of the time when he would sink his favored war axe into his master's foes.

All that's left is for that woman to move the way we need, but we'll just have to believe the lord's promises.

The preparations were quite thorough. If all went as planned, Ryoma would put an end to Rhoadseria's long history. The reality of war, however, was that even the most meticulous of plans could go awry, and as a seasoned warrior, Robert knew this all too well. His biggest doubt right now was a woman boarding this very boat—the very same woman who now spoke up from behind him.

"It should take a few more days," the source of his doubts said as she walked right in front of him.

Normally, Robert might have been shaken up and let his unease show in his voice and gestures, but this time he turned to look at her and bowed his head respectfully. Even though they were to put aside rank during this voyage, she was still another country's royalty. Additionally, she was the greatest contributor to this operation, so Robert couldn't risk acting discourteous toward her.

"Yes. I'm not sure how to thank you, Lady Ecclesia." Robert bowed impeccably, an unusual gesture for this otherwise uncouth man. If it weren't for Ecclesia Marinelle's contribution, this voyage would have been much more difficult.

Nevertheless, Ecclesia didn't seem to think she was doing anything that merited such gratitude. "I'm not doing much. I only asked the

Myest border control troops stationed near our side of the Thebes's mouth to let us through and act like they saw nothing."

There was no arrogance or irony to her tone. She genuinely thought she merely played her allotted role in this.

Robert responded to her with a nod.

Given her position, it probably really didn't take much effort, but that doesn't make her contribution any smaller.

Ecclesia Marinelle was one of the Kingdom of Myest's most prized generals, so asking the border guards for a minor favor didn't even count as a flex of her influential might. Even so, her doing so had allowed Robert and his forces to sail up the Thebes undetected so far.

Ecclesia, however, shook her head. "Besides, it's too soon to thank me. We still have a big task ahead of us."

"Of course. But still, I didn't think someone in your position would be fighting on our side. Signus doesn't let it show on his face, but he probably feels the same as me."

"Believe me, I never imagined things would come to this either." Ecclesia smiled mischievously, like a child who'd successfully pulled off a prank. "The fame of Count Salzberg's Twin Blades has reached Myest as well. Though I suppose I should call you Count Mikoshiba's Twin Blades now, yes? It's a curious thing, the way the wheel of fate spins."

Robert could only answer with a bitter smile, but he soon gave words to his doubts.

"Are you sure this was right, though?"

It was a vague question. Robert usually wouldn't beat around the bush like this, but the topic at hand was sensitive. In contrast to Robert, Ecclesia's expression remained unchanged.

"The person you see now is a Myest-born mercenary by the name of Ecclesia," she replied calmly. "As a mercenary, I will work to earn my pay and abide by my employer's orders. Nothing more and nothing else, yes?"

She flashed Robert a smile that hid no guilt whatsoever. Indeed, Ecclesia likely didn't feel any regret in her choice at all.

Robert looked slightly taken aback. "I mean, all that is true, but..."

If one were to consider her a mercenary, Ecclesia's words were accurate, but the reality was that the woman speaking to him was Myest's general, and Robert wasn't sure how easily he could accept her cover story. This wasn't to say that Robert wanted nothing to do with her, though, and he knew of the secret pact made between Baron Mikoshiba and the Kingdom of Myest.

But the three kingdoms of the western continent's east have at times clashed, only to unite at other times to repel common enemies and defend themselves. To think Myest would turn away from that arrangement so

easily...

When he considered the unique relationship the three kingdoms harbored, Robert felt a twinge of unease about Ecclesia. If this plan were to succeed, the Rhoadserian kingdom would collapse, and that wasn't necessarily in Myest's interests.

Ecclesia's smile didn't waver, though. "Our kingdom, Myest, is a country of commerce and trade, and trust is a necessity in business. Once we've made a pact and have been paid accordingly, we would never betray a business partner. That's both Myest's pride and the greatest commodity we boast. All the same, our country isn't like merchants who place importance strictly on business."

"You mean...your people?"

"Yes. A nation is made up of its subjects and their livelihoods, and a country's biggest duty is to ensure the safety and stability of its people. It is for this reason a sovereign and his retainers exist. However..."

"Lupis Rhoadserians isn't worthy of joining forces with?"

Ecclesia didn't answer, but the expression on her face made her thoughts quite clear.

For a while, silence hung between the two of them. After some time, Ecclesia spoke quietly.

"Does that alleviate your doubts?"

Robert flashed a savage smile and once again bowed, apologizing for his impoliteness.

A few days later, a group of 2,500 troops appeared on the plains near Heraklion, a large city in southern Rhoadseria. They had but one goal: to stab their enemy in the back, where they would be most defenseless. This invasion would go on to greatly affect the state of the war far to the north...

Afterword

I doubt there are many such readers left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. And to those of you who have kept up with the series since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume in March. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

At the time of writing this afterword, it's already mid-June, and the volume will be released in mid-July, at which point we would be in year 3 of the Reiwa period. We're entering the second half of the year, but time does pass by quickly. This is probably due to the pandemic and the state of emergency preventing us from leaving the house.

Just last year, in April and May, I was able to go out to see my nephews' and nieces' school entrance ceremonies, go to welcoming parties at work, and go watch the sakura bloom with friends. But this year, I've been strictly indoors.

With the Covid situation not showing any signs of winding down yet, authors like me are at home every day and very rarely leave. Thanks to that, it's hard to tell the changing of the seasons, and days just pass you by.

It has given me the chance to catch up on movies on streaming services, or read all the ebooks I've bought but neglected to read, so life like this has its perks. And yet, I have my misgivings about this situation. I'm starting to ask myself if I'll be able to go back to how I used to live once the state of emergency is lifted.

In the end, spending two hours twice a day commuting to and from work is hard. Of course, going to work comes with the advantage of eating at my favorite restaurants along the way, so there are merits and shortcomings to everything.

Apparently, the state of emergency is set to be lifted on June 20, and they'll start distributing the vaccine in full force, so perhaps the pandemic's end is in sight. But it's said a mutation of the virus is possible, so it's hard to tell at this point.

The Tokyo Olympics are also set to start in July, but given the situation, it's difficult to get excited for it. Personally, I was looking forward to the Olympics and would like for it to be held. Taking the contestants' wishes into consideration, it also feels like it would be best to do so. But considering the risk of infection, I can understand why some are calling for it to be canceled. It's a difficult topic, to be

sure.

The last Tokyo Olympics took place in 1964, over half a century ago, so if they get canceled, who's to say I'll have a chance to see it in my lifetime... That said, given the Winter Olympics in Sapporo and the Nagano Olympics, the frequency of them being held does seem to rise, but I prefer to watch it in the summer. Not that I dislike winter sports. But for some reason, the Winter Olympics fails to excite me.

That said, I do watch it when it's on TV, so I guess it's just a personal issue of mine. Maybe it's just the inclusion of the word "winter"? Also, and more importantly, I wish they'd lift the restrictions on selling alcohol and operation hours at restaurants. I understand the restrictions are there for a reason, but half of my usual places are closed for business because of it, and those that are still open have to serve soft drinks instead of alcohol...

I can understand ramen stores not serving alcohol, so I won't complain there, but some dishes absolutely demand alcohol on the side. When I saw a poster at one of my regular pork skewer places in Shinjuku saying they only serve soft drinks, I ended up giving up and just going home. I understand that, in the harsh state of the market, I should have probably gone in and pitched in to help their profits, but the thought of fried food without beer or a highball is just too much for me...

On June 21, the restriction on selling alcohol was lifted while restricting the number of customers, so I stopped by the place, but a friend of mine from Bangladesh lamented that their sales really took a huge hit. And he's usually such a bright, funny person too. But seeing no one come in after me did give the sad impression of a dead mall. But just as I called for the bill, I saw new customers come in, so it's not like they got no traffic at all.

I can only hope my presence would prompt others to visit. After all, seeing an empty restaurant would make anyone think twice about going in.

Anyway, after wasting some of the afterword page count on these mundane concerns, let's start our traditional summary of the volume's highlights. This volume marks the official start of the war between Queen Lupis's northern subjugation army and Ryoma Mikoshiba's forces.

When volume 4 came out in July, 2016, Queen Lupis betrayed Ryoma and sent him to the Wortenia Peninsula. That was five years ago in real world time, and it took fifteen volumes before I could finally get to the long awaited battle between Lupis Rhoadserians and Ryoma Mikoshiba. And while sparks have been flying between the two in the background the whole time, the war is finally beginning in earnest.

That said, in terms of numbers, Queen Lupis holds the clear advantage. She is, despite all her faults, the queen of an entire country. One would normally expect the northern subjugation army to win easily, but keep in mind that they're up against our protagonist, young Mikoshiba. He will try to change the tides of the war with many plots and unconventional methods.

As tactics and conspiracies rock the battlefield, Ryoma and Helena have an unexpected meeting on the field of battle. These two once-allies lock eyes, now standing on opposing sides, and promise to eventually lock blades before going their separate ways again...

When I word it like this, they almost sound like lovers torn apart by war, but Helena and Ryoma are closer to a grandmother and her grandson. But Helena, being the charming character that she is, is the kind of character I enjoy writing about.

In addition, we learn more about the Organization from Kikuna Samejima, and about Asuka and Rodney's conflict, so there's much to dig into with volume 19.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who was involved with the production of this book, and all you readers for picking it up. Next time, we reach a milestone number in volume 20! I intend to keep it up, so please continue supporting *Record of Wortenia War*.









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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 19

by Ryota Hori

Translated by ZackZeal

Edited by Suzanne Seals

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